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Sermon for the Feast of the Holy Name, January 1, 2012  
St. Joseph's Episcopal Church  
Lectionary Year B: Luke 2:15-21

I can remember how ridiculous so many of my friends and I thought it was when bottled water first hit supermarket shelves and vending machines. Even at fourteen or fifteen years old, we were appalled that something as basic as water, the common ingredient for all life, could be bottled and sold for profit. The truth is that water had been bottled in glass and sold from mountain springs for at least a century prior to that time. It only gained a niche market in the U. S. with the arrival of the now ubiquitous plastic bottle. That was all it really took to make water a market commodity: a bit of marketing and a new, attractive design. Of course, as an increasing number of studies are showing, it is questionable whether the bottled water we pay a buck twenty-five for at the grocery store checkout lane is really any healthier or cleaner than the tap water we get for under a penny. Is there really any difference besides the new, shiny packaging?

On this New Year's morning, as we peer through our collective national hangover – from holiday over-drinking, over-eating, and generally over-consuming – I'd like us to wrestle with an admittedly cynical question: Is there really anything *new* about this new year? Perhaps in the moments leading up to that magnificent glittering ball's descent, transfixed in a midnight drunken stupor by a desire for "change we can believe in," we still believed that maybe this year...just maybe, something truly new, truly transformative lies on our horizon. And yet, I wonder if our new year is not a lot like the novelty of bottled water – the same old thing in new, shiny packaging.

Each new year, our whole world basically hits the cosmic “reset” button. Amid new year resolutions – to lose more weight, to stop smoking, to eat healthier, to pay more recognition to neighbors in need – even markets adjust and a sort of “fiscal asceticism” sets in. We trim the body fat as businesses and corporations trim the losses of one year to prepare for increased profits in the new. What this whole operation obscures, however, is what does *not* change.

This morning, the first day of the new year, many of us still live with the pain of broken relationships, the struggle of financial hardship, the anger and confusion of estrangement from friends and loved ones, both dead and living. We still live with a broken economy, with militarized processes of peacemaking, with a world where the 1% so often get a “pass” at the expense of the 99%, and where the poorest and least are marginalized more and more each day. In short, we still live in the ambiguity, the uncertainty of life itself.

Today, as we keep the feast of the nativity of Christ, we stand as if in a great lake while the joyous ripples of the arrival of God in our midst continue to splash up against our shimmering bodies. The joy of this Christmas season, however, as our gospel story relates, does not allow us to supplant the intractable ordinariness and brokenness of our world.

Our gospel story from Luke in fact helps us reckon with the true significance of God’s arrival in our midst in Jesus. All of the characters in Luke’s infancy narrative remind us that Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One enters into the context, history, memory, and hope of a very particular people, Israel, the people of God. The elderly Zechariah is a temple priest who is chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and

offer incense. His wife, Elizabeth, who is “getting on in years,” is a descendant of the priestly house of Aaron. Together, they evoke the figures of Abraham and Sarah, who were also promised a son late in life. Luke goes out of his way twice to remind us that Joseph descended from the house of David. The shepherds also evoke the figure of David, who was called from the fields of Bethlehem where he was “keeping the sheep” and anointed by Samuel with the horn of oil as king. Simeon, who enters Luke’s story after our reading for today ends, is awaiting “the consolation of Israel” to whom it had been revealed by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. The equally elderly prophetess Anna praises God as she speaks of this child for all awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. All of these characters remind us of Israel’s exile and diaspora, of the long and uncertain promise of the coming Messiah to a displaced people.

But, none for Luke more than Mary. After receiving Elizabeth’s “loud blessing,” who addresses the child in Mary’s womb with, “my Lord,” Mary bursts into song, explicitly improvising on Hannah’s song who also cries out at the news of Samuel’s impending birth, the same Samuel who would later anoint the shepherd David as king. Miraculously expectant Mary evokes for Luke Israel’s deepest hopes in the face of exile, desperation, suffering, hardship, and uncertainty. This young mother is herself a figure of the people of Israel in exile of whom Isaiah prophesied five or six centuries prior:

Sing, O barren one who did not bear;  
burst into song and shout,  
you who have not been in labor!...  
O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted,  
All your children shall be taught by the Lord,  
and great shall be the prosperity of  
your children.  
In righteousness you shall be established;

you shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear;  
and from terror, for it shall not come near you.

Is. 54:1, 11, 13-14

Mary is a figure of Israel's faithful reception of the fulfillment of this promise, though she does not fully understand the words of God's promise. Notice her responses to these "things" these "words" [*rhēmata*]. When the angel of the Lord first appears to her, greeting her as the "favored one," she ponders what kind of greeting this might be and is perplexed. Later, when the shepherds share all that was told them by the whole army of angels about this child, all who hear it are amazed. But, Mary treasured all these words [*rhēmata*] and pondered them in her heart. Even later, when Jesus is twelve years old and leaves his parents in great anxiety when he stays behind in his "Father's" house, Mary again treasures all these "words" [*rhēmata*] in her heart.

The surprise of God's grace meets all of our gospel characters in the middle of the humdrum of daily life. It is as they are going about the business of everyday life and all the uncertainty that accompanies it when God powerfully steps on the scene in this little child. The shepherds, like young David, are keeping watch over their sheep by night – to ward off potential predators and robbers – when not only an angel, but the glory of the Lord appears all around them, proclaiming to them the good news of the fulfillment of God's long-expected promise. Likewise, Mary and Joseph, as one biblical scholar points out, go to Bethlehem not at the orders of the angel, but, rather, because "the Roman despot that dispatches them there for registration." In the middle of increasing political tensions of the day, ready or not, the Lord is coming on the scene.

But, Mary, though initially perplexed that God has shown up on her doorstep, ponders the significance of the events that are unfolding before her eyes. The Greek word

Luke uses for Mary's "pondering," *sympállousa*, means something like, "to piece together." So, Mary reflects on her own situation, on Israel's situation and begins to piece together God's promise in Scripture, Israel's wandering and exile, and the significance of who this, her child will be.

And so Mary models for us too how to piece together God's promises in our own time and place as she *continues* to ponder, to meditate, and to chew on these words about her child, the Messiah-Lord. She teaches us that all these words mean something new because of this little person, and of him there is a great deal still to learn. We too have sat with Mary beside the manger, we have exclaimed, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come!" and "Yea, Lord, we greet thee, born this happy morning." And yet, our waiting continues because we await Christ's coming again. Like Mary, we don't know all there is to know about him – neither do we know all there is to know about ourselves – because we encounter him amid the ambiguity, the uncertainty of life. Jesus Christ has come, but he comes to us here and now, in the middle of things. The late Lutheran pastor and homiletics professor Edmund Steimle describes Jesus' coming like a person standing in the eye of a hurricane. He is himself, Steimle says, the "peace that passes all understanding because it is not a peace apart from conflict, pain, suffering, violence, and confusion; that's the kind of peace we can understand all too well. But, it's a peace like the peace in the eye of a hurricane, a peace smack in the middle of it all, a peace that indeed passes all understanding."

And if the first Christmas night is like the eye of the storm, a "silent night, holy night" where "all is calm, all is bright," then where does that leave us today but in the middle of the resurgent storm? The eschatological horizon of the gospel, the recognition

that God is not done with us yet, thrusts us back on the ambiguity of life and this can leave us feeling uneasy. But, it is this recognition that is also our only true source of hope amidst the *reality* of life. Our gospel story doesn't feed us a bit of sugary-coated nostalgia, reducing the Christmas story to Bing Crosby dreaming of a white Christmas. Rather, Luke tells it like it is. Lest we forget, Jesus himself was subject to betrayal and violence, and eventually death – at our own hands.

If the gospel doesn't allow us merely to suppress or forget the difficulties of life, however, neither does the good news of Jesus leave us to them alone or without the hope to keep pressing forward. The last verse in today's gospel reading, while seemingly journalistic in tone, reporting what Mary and Joseph did on Jesus' eighth day, like some ancient Twitter feed offers us hope. "And when eight days were completed, the time came for him to be circumcised; and his name was called Jesus, the name called by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." *Who is it*, though, that calls him the name Jesus? Mary and Joseph? Our text doesn't say. Sometimes in the Greek, however, the use of a passive verb with an unspecified agent indicates that God is the agent. When Luke reminds us that he was given this name *by the angel* while he was in the womb, he signals such a "divine passive." The angel is not just a messenger, but represents the very presence of the glory of the Lord. It is the Lord who gives this child the name Jesus, a normal enough name in first-century Palestine, but which here also evokes his purpose and mission: He is *Yeshua*, the One who saves. "Jesus" may be a rather ordinary name for a very human child, but *this* Jesus is at once the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, the One who will reign on the throne of his ancestor David, over the house of Jacob, of whose kingdom there will be no end – he is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord himself.

This name indeed brings with it good news of great joy for all the people, not only for Mary and Israel, but for us too. For, as Simeon exclaimed when he took his own Lord into his arms: he will be “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Every Wednesday night, a small group of us gather together here at St. Joseph’s for prayers for healing and eucharist. We bring all that ails us, physical, spiritual, mental, emotional illnesses – in short, the uncertainty of life itself – and we offer all of ourselves up to the Living God. There, at the threshold where meet our fragile, vulnerable lives and the overwhelming power and peace of the gracious God which passes all understanding, we lift the following prayer over one another: “The Almighty Lord, who is a strong tower to all who put their trust in him, to whom all things in heaven, on earth, and under the earth bow and obey: Be now and evermore your defense, and make you know and feel that the only Name under heaven given for health and salvation is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The good news for us this morning is that the Holy Name of Jesus is none other than the Holy Name of the Lord, the unpronounceable name of the great I AM. *This* name comes to us right here, in this place / right now, in this very moment and says to each of us in the words of Isaiah: “I am the Lord, that is my name...See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare” (Is. 42:8,9). The reading from St. Paul to the Galatians reminds us that, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” In Jesus’ name, God proclaims that we are God’s. And this is indeed the sort of news that is truly new, truly transformative. Because God has come into the middle of the

ambiguity and uncertainty of life in Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit we can now place our hope in the Holy Name of the Lord. For, by the name of Jesus, God speaks God's name over us, and makes us God's own children.

So, this morning, as the rest of the world hits the reset button, let us who gather in this place in the name of Jesus step boldly out into the new things God has in store for us. Let us cling to God's promises, to the very name of Jesus himself who names us as God's own. So now, in this new year, receive the blessing of God's Holy Name:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen.