**God has Three Names**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

For the Feast of the Holy Name, January 1, 2017

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

“The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,  
It isn't just one of your holiday games;  
You may think at first I'm as mad as a hatter  
When I tell you, a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.

First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,  
Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,  
Such as Victor or Jonathan, or George or Bill Bailey -  
All of them sensible everyday names.

There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,  
Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:  
Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter -  
But all of them sensible everyday names.

But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,  
A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,  
Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,  
Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?

Of names of this kind, I can give you a quorum,  
Such as Munkustrap, Quaxo, or Coricopat,  
Such as Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum -  
Names that never belong to more than one cat.

But above and beyond there's still one name left over,  
And that is the name that you never will guess;  
The name that no human research can discover -  
But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,  
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:  
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation  
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:

His ineffable effable  
Effanineffable  
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.”

This poem is a passage from Eliot’s classic work, “Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats” upon which much of the material for the Broadway musical Cats is based. Eliot suggests in his poem that cats have three names: An everyday common name – be it plain or fancy – for regular use by others; a dignified name unique to each one – for occasional use on special occasions; and a secret name that is known to no one.

Though I’m not a cat, I can easily identify my first and second names. My everyday name is Chris. My dignified name Christopher Scott Wendell, used pretty much only when I’m being lauded or scolded. And while that name is perhaps not unique to me, I am, in fact the only Christopher Scott Wendell that I know.

But what about this third name…a secret name known only to me? I’m pretty sure I don’t have one. And what would such a secret name be for? The whole reason we name anything at all is for the purposes of communication. We give things names things so that they will be recognizable, understandable and distinguishable to others. Naming is an act of demystifying, in the name of efficiency. We give names to people as a way of quickly defining who they are and who they belong to: which family, which tribe, which language group, which nationality. All these motivations for having a name are transactional, functional. Why bother to have a secret name if you’re the only one who ever will have it?

Secret names, Eliot suggests, serve an opposite function: not for the purpose of communication, but for the purpose of self-understanding. A secret name defines a private sphere of our own beings – claiming a part of our identity that is not constructed by others, not subject to those with whom we are in relationship, not constrained by the need to summarize ourselves efficiently for others. A secret name’s value comes not from how it demystifies ourselves for others – rather, it comes from how it re-mystifies our own sense of ourselves. A secret name reminds us to respect the mystery of who are we, and whose we are. Now I kind of think I’d like one of third names…!

It seems to me that God probably has three names too, or at least, three kinds of names. God has dignified, formal names used by the official religious traditions of the world: Allah, Yaweh, Shiva, Jehovah, Elohim, Hu, Baha, Krishna, and on and on. God also has common names. The names that people give to God in their own personal life of prayer. If you’ve read *The Shack* by William Young, you may recall that the man at the center of the story gives God the name Papa. That’s probably not the casual name you use when you talk to God. But perhaps you have a different one. Many people do, have an informal name for God that they use in prayer. If your prayer life seems a little impersonal, you might want to pick one and try it out for awhile.

God probably has a third, secret name, too – a name known only to God. Several world religions seem to suggest this in the names they give for God. In Talmudic Judaism, the name of God that we would say as Yahweh, is forbidden to be used. One of its common substitutes is Ha-Shem, which translates literally as “the name” – perhaps in part an acknowledgement that we can’t know God’s secret, mystical name. In Islam, tradition has it that God has 99 names, though the various lists given by the tradition are inconsistent. One mystical branch of Islam holds that the 99 names point to a single Greatest name that is unknown (“the one to which if he is called by it, he will answer”). I like imagining that God has a secret name, known only to God, because it reminds me that the mystery of God transcends both the personal names people give to God and the formal ones our human religions have come up with. It reminds me that it will always be true that dimensions of God will remain beyond not just my knowing, but beyond all human knowing. There is something comforting in the truth that God’s secret name will never be fully known.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name, which, for Christians is Jesus. It’s a feast whose meaning and purpose has evolved over time. At first it was simply a marking of the day Jesus would have been circumcised. Over time, however, the feast has become more associated with the act his naming, which would have occurred at the same circumcision ceremony.

The name Jesus was given to him by the Angel Gabriel from God, during the annunciation to Mary – so there was hardly any suspense or drama at what his name would be during the actual event. And yet, given the name has become such a symbol, such a charged word over these past 20 centuries, it seems quite fitting for our calendar to have a feast commemorating the name of Jesus. I have Jewish friends who, having experienced various kinds of Christian anti-Semitism in their lives, find it hard to even hear the word Jesus – notwithstanding the fact that Jesus himself was Jewish. I have Christian friends, even, who don’t mind hearing about Jesus, but have a hard to time using his name in prayer – or, in some cases, even speaking it aloud. This was true for me, even, at an earlier time in my life. Praying to Jesus or using his name aloud in a reverent way felt strange because, at that point, I really didn’t have any kind of relationship with him. I didn’t know much about him; and I didn’t know him. So it was hard to say his name. Sometimes even hard to hear it without feeling awkward.

What about you? What do you think of the name Jesus? It’s hardly God’s third name, God’s secret name. But for you, is Jesus more like the first kind of name – personal, casual, a name that seems commonplace in your vocabulary, that trips off your tongue? Is it one of your names for God in prayer? Or is Jesus more like God’s second name – unique and formal, used only in heightened speech, in moments of carefully thought out address. Does the name conjure up images of vulnerability and divine companionship? Triumphal victory? Nervous feelings of insecurity? Does hearing the name Jesus quicken your breath and spark your pulse, like when you hear the name of whomever is most beloved to you? Does it feel familiar? Warm? Is it soul-consoling? Burden-lifting? Does it mystify or demystify? Is it foreboding, awe-inspiring, humbling to you, this Holy Name?

There’s no right answers. But it helps to know what your answers are, or at least, what some of them are, for now, when you hear the Holy Name. If you’re not sure how it feels, take a deep breath. If you like, you can close your eyes, and listen for a moment. And as you listen, try and notice without judgment or reproach, just notice, what happens within you as open your heart and hear the Holy Name: Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Amen.