

# A Name for the New Year

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, January 1, 2012, The Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Based on Numbers 6:22-27 and Luke 2:15-21.*

**H**appy New Year! Well, here we are in church on New Year's Day, another Morning After. The morning after all the New Year's celebrations, including New York's own in Times Square, said to be the biggest New Year's Eve party in the world. Being in Times Square with a million of my closest friends is not my thing, but I have to admit, I do like to watch it on TV from the comfort of home.

Actually, one New Year's Eve I did watch the Times Square ball drop live. Even from a mile uptown (maybe especially from a mile uptown), it was spectacular. When the ball landed, the fireworks went off, and so did thousands of us, starting the 5-mile Midnight Run around Central Park. I found myself running alongside people dressed in pajamas, carrying their pillows. I ran with people strung with blinking Christmas lights. The water stops offered both water and champagne. It was great!

I like watching the other celebrations as they unfold around the world, too—always Sydney first, then Hong Kong, Dubai, Paris, London, Edinburgh. On New Year's Day, people in certain places gather on beaches and run into the icy water to celebrate the new year. I'd rather be in church.

January 1 probably comes closest to being the world's only truly global public holiday.

New Year's Day is a collective time to pause, take stock—to look back at the year just completed and to look forward to the new year ahead. When you look back at 2011, what do you remember? The Arab Spring, the summer of men in public life behaving badly, the financial crisis going global, Kate and Will's' royal wedding, Occupy movements that went global, troops coming home from Iraq? I remember that this time last year, we in New York City were still trying to dig our way out of a blizzard. This Fall, even our weather proved more interesting than the presidential race preliminaries, what with the earthquake, a hurricane, and our freaky Halloween snowstorm. Oh—and there were a few changes at St. Bart's.

We do some personal looking back and looking forward, too: what went well for me last year? What didn't go so well? What can I learn from that to take forward into the new year with me? What do I want to accomplish this next year? Even more important, what kind of person do I want to be this next year? As a church community, what do we at St. Bart's want to accomplish in this new year? Who do we want to be as a faith community?

Inevitably, this taking stock leads some to make New Year's Resolutions. I read an estimate that 40-45% of us make New Year's resolutions. Want to guess what the Top 10 New Years Resolutions are?

1. Spend more time with family and friends
2. Increase physical fitness
3. Lose weight
4. Quit smoking
5. Enjoy life more
6. Quit drinking
7. Get out of debt
8. Learn something new
9. Help others
10. Get organized

[<http://pittsburgh.about.com/od/holidays/tp/resolutions.htm>]

I asked a friend who is a therapist if the holidays were an especially busy time. To my surprise, she said, not really. "But," she said, "business really picks up in February. Because by that time people have broken their resolutions—they haven't gone to the gym three times a week, or lost the five pounds, or quit smoking, or fixed their marriage, or started looking for that new job. So they come to see me."

This year, with New Year's Day falling on a Sunday, we have a collision of popular culture and faith tradition. In our Episcopal tradition, January 1 is always celebrated as the Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus. (Footnote: I grew up Baptist and we didn't observe feasts, except the kind in the church hall with fabulous Southern cooking.) The fine print in our Book of Common Prayer notes that when January 1 falls on a Sunday, then Holy Name trumps the regular Sunday readings. Trumping indicates that the Feast of the Holy Name is a rather big deal.

Another footnote: Until 1979, January 1 was called the Feast of the Circumcision. I can't tell you how glad I am they changed the name, because we are not going there. So back to why we celebrate Holy Name, and why on January 1.

For those of you who like counting, January 1 is eight days after Christmas Day, the day we celebrate Jesus' birth. In Jesus' time, the Law of Moses required that every male child be circumcised on the eighth day from his birth, with circumcision being a sign of the continuing covenant between God and Abraham "and his children forever." Luke records that Mary and Joseph, as faithful Jewish parents, observed this ritual of circumcision, at which time the child

was officially named. It would have been a festive occasion, with family and friends coming together to witness the naming of the child, likely with a shared meal afterward.

I've never been to a *bris*, but I think it may be much the same in our time. I do know that it sounds a lot like our service of Baptism (which we'll have next Sunday, by the way); family and friends gather around, we all renew our Baptismal Covenant, and then we all share a meal afterward.

I like to start each of our Baptism Preparation classes by asking each set of parents how they chose their child's name, and for an adult being baptized, how their name was chosen, and what significance the name has for them and their family. We all hear the most wonderful stories from each other: she was named for both our grandmothers; he was named for my father's best friend; we named her for my favorite aunt who died the same day she was born; it was a name that sounded right with our family name; we wanted a name that no one else has because we wanted him to have a name that was uniquely his own.

Names are important. Names are powerful. Ask anyone who's had to struggle through life with a name that's hard to bear, or to pronounce. Ask any celebrity who has name recognition. Names often change with marriage or adoption, indicating something important about identity.

Names signify something to the world. "Jesus" isn't a name Mary and Joseph picked from studying books of baby names. It's a name that was told to them by the angel Gabriel, before Jesus was born, or even conceived.

Sometimes parents name a baby before birth—they already have a sense of who this child is or who they want this child to be, and that name shapes who the child becomes. Sometimes parents have to live with a child (or even a new pet) for a while to get a sense of who they are, what their personality is like, to see what name fits. A friend's granddaughter was born a few weeks ago. When I asked what they'd named her, they said they hadn't yet. The parents waited several days, finally arriving at the name that seemed to fit her. And when we heard the name, we all knew immediately it was the right one for her. Another friend told me of someone whose parents kept changing their child's name for the first three years of his life, trying to get it "right." I can only guess how much therapy was needed.

The name "Jesus" in Hebrew means "savior" or "deliverer" or "The Lord is salvation." As Matthew records, "because he would save his people from their sins."

Wow. That word "sin" lands harshly, doesn't it, after the magical glow of Christmas Eve, the joy of Christmas Day, the partying and sparkle of New Year's Eve? We talk about sin in the baptism classes, because the language of sin does come up in our baptism rite, and it's in our prayers, including the Eucharistic Prayer we'll pray in a few minutes.

I have come to understand sin as separation, meaning impaired relationship or non-relationship. Try substituting the word "separation" for the word "sin" and see if that changes anything for you. Jesus would "save his people from their separation." That would be separation from God, separation from each other, even from one's self. I can understand sin more helpfully, and more truthfully, as separation, rather than as some catalog of bad things done or good things not done.

I know that I can get separated from others, from God, even from my deepest self (the self God created me to be) because of something I do or don't do, or because of something someone else does or doesn't do. Harsh words, angry action, disrespect, even simple misunderstanding—all can create separation, both on a personal scale and on a global scale.

So how does Jesus save us (heal us) from our separations? You may remember this part of our Baptism Covenant: we are asked, "Whenever [not IF but WHEN] you fall into sin [separation], will you repent [turn around] and return to the Lord?" To which we answer, "I will, with God's help." Here's the beauty and the hope of this: try as we might not to, we are always going to fall into some sort of separation. Whenever we recognize that we have fallen into separation, we can call on the name of Jesus and simply turn around and start making our way back toward relationship. We can do that every week, every day, every hour, every minute, whenever and however often we need to. It is truly limitless. Jesus, God, is always there to meet us and help us back.

Luke's gospel, more so than any of the others, is clear that Jesus came to save all people—not just the ones who've been good, not just the lucky ones, not even just the ones who happen to believe in him. Jesus came to save (to heal) all people—all of us—from our separations.

We begin this new year perhaps only too aware of the separation that exists in the world, perhaps only too aware of the separations we know in our own lives. We also begin this New Year with hope, hope that may seem irrational, but hope that is in fact anchored solidly in our tradition, hope grounded in the name of Jesus the Christ, the one whose name we bear.

None of us knows what this new year will bring. Each of us has hopes and dreams and fears, like we have when we embark on any new journey.

Our lesson from Numbers is part of a section describing Israel's preparations for leaving Mt. Sinai, where the people have been camped for almost a year, to continue their journey through the wilderness to the land of promise. It includes a blessing that was designated for Israel's time of departure from Sinai, and was to be used each day throughout their journey.

As we move into this new year, may we remember the name of Jesus; may we ponder the name of God and learn again what it means to begin anew, to start clean and fresh, to walk trusting in the company of God.

May God's blessing be ours as we continue our journey: "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."

Amen.

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