



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, January 1, 2012
The Feast of the Holy Name

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.
on
Numbers 6:22-27
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“THE LORD LIFT UP HIS COUNTENANCE UPON THEE”

The reading you heard from the sixth chapter of the book of Numbers is newly appointed for today’s feast, the feast of the Holy Name, and it contains one of the gems of the Bible. It is called the “priestly blessing” or the “Aaronic blessing,” the blessing given to Aaron and his sons, by God through Moses, to pronounce over the people of Israel, a blessing which, here at Saint Thomas, was pronounced over us in Hebrew at this year’s interfaith Thanksgiving service. *The LORD bless thee and keep thee: The LORD make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.* Those three elegantly short petitions, in English, some 33 words, are in Hebrew but 15: elegant, short petitions of 3, 5, and 7 words respectively.

This priestly blessing is about the special nearness of God. It is to be spoken over many people (“the children of Israel”) but its language is singular (“the LORD bless *thee*”): thus it takes the whole people of Israel to be as one person—one person to whom God is very near. It invokes three times the Name of God, which is customarily printed in English Bibles as the word “LORD” all in caps. In Hebrew, this is the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter personal Name of God which pious Jews never pronounce. When they come upon God’s name in the Bible, instead of reading God’s name they substitute “Adonai,” which means “the Lord.” The word, however, if I may pronounce it this once for the sake of clarity, the personal and revealed Name of God, is “Yahweh,” revealed to the people of Israel and spoken only by the priests, and only when they said this blessing. A commentator writes: “In this prayer [Numbers 6:24-26] on behalf of Israel, the priests pronounced over the people the Ineffable Name of God.” As indeed today’s passage concludes: God says, “So shall they [Aaron and his sons, the priests] put my name upon the children of Israel.”

So in this blessing, in its priestly enactment, God’s actual Name is “put upon” God’s people. The content of the blessing, the nearness of God, is evoked in beautiful concrete images: that God’s face would shine upon the people, that God would be gracious and beneficent, that he would lift up his countenance—turn his face—unto his people, with the result that they would be established in peace.

To grasp the significance of this, let us think of some alternatives. It might have been the case that God would have created the wonderful world and yet never drawn specially near to anyone in it. And so on this New Year's Day we might quite fittingly count our blessings. We (to start with) have an awesome universe which emerged nearly 14 billion years ago from an unimaginable singularity, and which stretches, literally, in ways that blow the minds of scientists who investigate it. When (turning from the very large to the very small) we look into the constituent particles of the matter that makes up this unimaginably vast and stretching universe, we find behavior and reality that again blow the mind of those who gaze therein. Turning then inward to ourselves, we see we are organisms of untold complexity, with cells and circulating blood, nerves and bone, digestion and procreation—to use again that overused and yet indispensable word, each of us is, in truth, awesomely complex and beautiful. And most amazing of all, we have minds able to grasp and probe and explore and come to some tiny yet precious comprehension of these mysteries of the huge cosmos, of the subatomic world, and of the pulsating organisms that are alive.

These are our blessings, and these, all of them, speak to the reality of the one who made them, made us, fashions all of it gratuitously and freely. But where is he? Where is our maker? He is not in the universe, for he is not something made; but neither is he outside the universe, for that kind of talk is just confused—there is nothing outside the universe; the universe has no “outside.” It could have been true that we would count our blessings, recognize the sheer gift that reality is, and yet never know anything about the maker, the cause, the giver who bestowed so much of such wonder upon us. We would count our blessings in sheer ignorance.

But such is not our condition. God has not only made us, God has chosen a people and has spoken to them and has revealed to them his Name and arranged for his Name to be pronounced upon them. God has drawn specially close. The whole Bible is about God's desire to draw close to his people. That's why he reveals his Name to Moses and why he has the priests pronounce his Name over the people when they give the Aaronic blessing. And that's also why, in the fullness of time, he takes on our flesh and humbles himself and does not shun the virgin's womb. Jesus simply is God's own speech to us, God's Word, God's consummation of his desire to be with his people. And God has given to him the Name that is above all names, his own Name, the Tetragrammaton, the Name spoken over the people by the priests—that Name is given to Jesus. And so it is fulfilled in the flesh: *The LORD [the name above all names] bless thee and keep thee, make his face shine upon thee, be gracious unto thee, lift up his countenance upon thee, establish thee in peace.* This is fulfilled in Jesus, whose face shines upon all human beings, whose grace is offered to the whole world, whose countenance just is the face of God turned unto all people.

What this means is both very ordinary and at the same time life-changing. Because of Jesus, any person who wants can become part of God's people. And that means, all the people (who want to) can hear God speak, can have God's Name pronounced upon them. This is the most important fact about any human being: does he or she know God's Name, or not? To know God's Name means we can talk to God and he will hear us. That's why we pray “in the Name of Jesus Christ”: we pray in the Name of the one whose Name was given to us when he lifted up his countenance upon us and spoke to us as the Word made flesh.

It is a new year. Make, please, a simple resolution: to love the Name of Jesus—God's Name, God speaking to you—and call upon that Name as the first and last thing you do every day of the year.