

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
1 January 2012**

*Holy Name:* Num 6:22-27; Ps 8;  
Phil 2:5-11; Lk 2:15-21

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Happy New Year! For most of us the significance of January 1, 2012 is that we are turning from one year to the next. In this particular case we are turning over from one eventful, surprising and painful year to another that promises to be full of uncertainty, struggle, and conflict.

We are leaving behind the year of the “Arab spring,” and birth of the Occupy movement; the year when gay marriage was legalized in New York State and the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy was dismantled in the American armed forces; the year when we considered the possibility that nations—whole nations!—could default on their debts, including Greece, including the United States; the year when perhaps we began to understand that economic hardship was perhaps not just a temporary, quickly fixed problem but rather the sign of critical and poorly understood shifts in the world order.

And we are entering the year when we will learn more about where the Arab spring and the Occupy movements will take us; the year when maybe the world economy will begin to show signs of real flourishing—not just for the few, but for all—and then again maybe it won’t; the year of a presidential election in the United States when things are bound to get contentious, alienating, dispiriting, and nasty.

But today we are still in the season of the Incarnation, the season when we commemorate and celebrate the coming of God to be with us in the person of Jesus Christ. Because January First this year falls on a Sunday, today is not simply the first Sunday after Christmas, but it is celebrated as the Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. And thus we hear Luke’s account of how Jesus was named according to Jewish custom eight days after his birth, and thus we hear Paul’s hymn from the letter to the Philippians telling us of the exaltation of Jesus’ name above every other name.

Today’s passage from Philippians is the most famous passage in the whole letter, and it is one of the most memorable passages in all of Paul’s writings. It is a “Christological hymn”—that is, it tries to tell us something about the nature of Jesus Christ. It summarizes the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the coming of God in the human form of a man named Jesus, a native of Nazareth, the incarnation of God that changed forever our understanding of what it means to be human. Paul does not know the birth stories that we hear from Matthew and Luke, but in this hymn he makes the same point that those stories make: in being born a human being, Jesus humbled himself and made himself subject to the vulnerability and pain of being human.

Paul reminds us, in this season when we celebrate the birth and the incarnation, that in becoming human Jesus is subject to the physical death that all human beings must endure. Not only that, but because of who Jesus was in human life, the death he suffered was the most humiliating death possible—being tortured and left to hang in slow suffocating agony on the cross, the form of execution the Romans used for political criminals and rebellious slaves. It wasn’t just that the Romans enjoyed being sadists; they used this visibly humiliating form of execution to send a message about the kinds of

behavior they would and would not tolerate so that their empire could continue to function according to their rules, to suit their interests.

It was precisely because of this humiliation and death on the cross, Paul tells us, that Jesus is exalted by God, and that his name becomes a name revered above every other name. At the mention of this sacred name, “every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” We can still imagine how Roman imperial authorities could have heard this as treason and blasphemy, pure and simple, in a political and social world where the emperor is the only person who could be considered a living god.

But Paul’s message is not about the glory of individual human beings, not even the human being known as Jesus of Nazareth. He is not primarily interested in making the simple case that Jesus Christ as Lord is more powerful than the Roman emperor. Instead he is telling us about a glory far more important, far more lasting than the glory of empires. He is telling us something about how we as human beings can become reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. He is teaching us something about how we can reverse the direction of our flight from God by showing us through Jesus’ example how to grow closer to God. He tells us of God’s desire to be reconciled to us, his children. He explains that in having God’s Son be born in weakness, poverty, and vulnerability, God reveals God’s self-giving love for men and women throughout the world.

In coming to live and die among us, Jesus Christ shared our humanity to remind us of what humanity is capable of. Paul calls the church in Philippi to “be of the same mind as Christ.” To us today that might seem like an impossible ideal to fulfill. Normal, human, fallible individuals sharing in the mind of Christ? Impossible, we would say.

But Paul reminds the church in Philippi, and he reminds us, of the power of faith. Our faith in God should empower our faith in the possibilities of human life. And if our faith in God and our faith in human possibility are driven by our acceptance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ into history, we should feel encouraged that the ideal of being of Christ’s mind, and having Christ’s heart, is a possible ideal. It is possible to hope for it, to pray for it, to aspire to it, and to achieve it if only in part, if only as far as our human strengths and weaknesses allow. It is for the encouragement to that faith that we come to worship and give thanks; it is for the strength to reach toward that ideal that we come to nourish ourselves at the Lord’s table.

It may well be a difficult year ahead for many of us, and even more for some of our neighbors—those who remain without jobs, those who cannot find enough food for themselves and their children, those who feel powerless to do anything about the systems that protect the strong and punish the weak. But for those of us who receive our hope and our courage from God’s grace, from God’s willingness to join us in our pain and weakness, from God’s self-emptying love for all humankind—the world will never lose its light; the world will never shed its beauty; the world will never be so dark that we cannot see faint glimpses of God’s glory.

But we need to remember that to get to the glory, we have to work for it. We need to remember that for us, as for God, we get to the glory through the self-emptying humility. In a world full of shouting and accusation, of competition and self-promotion, of greed, violence, and oppression, we need to remember that in God’s grace, in God’s incarnation, in God’s peace and serenity, we find the true strengths of courage, love, fellowship, and compassion.

In a world where we seem forever divided from one another, in a world where we cannot seem to stop ourselves from clashing along political, social, class, and religious battle fronts, we who call upon the Holy Name of Jesus Christ need to remember that the Holy Name in turn calls us to respond to God's grace with the firm faith that we are one human family, one community of God, rooted in love, selflessness, and concern for others.

That is the powerful witness that we are called to make in this year, in this city, in this world, in this time. That is the Name, and that is the faith, that will allow us to live in peace and to grow in love.