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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/1/2011, The Name of Jesus  
Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 2:15-21

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that *at the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

What is there in a name? Sometimes, a name is a fairly arbitrary collection of sounds associated with a thing in order to help identify that thing. The name itself has no meaning, but is important anyway because it helps to pick out something in the world. The name “Gregory,” for example, has no particular meaning, as far as I know, but it helps point to things. So, here I am, Gregory.

But sometimes, a name is full of meaning. To bear that name signifies things to others. The name has meaning for them.

I was reminded of this a while back when I first began visiting my friendly neighborhood Russian hardware store. I have always liked the clerks in that store. We would chat, and one day, the checkout clerk asked me my name. I answered, “Gregory Fryer,” which launched the clerk into laughter. She called out to one of the clerks: “Did you hear that? The priest is named ‘Fryer’.” She was pretty merry about it. So was the other clerk. They began clapping each other on the back and laughing. So I ask them, “Is it good to be a Fryer?” It was hard to get a clear answer from them, they were chuckling so much. But at last, the checkout clerk wiped the tears from her laughing eyes and said, “Ahh, sure, it’s okay.”

I asked for some more details.

So, she gathered herself together and explained to me that in the lingo of the Russian petty crime scene, a “Fryer” is a dimwit around whom you can say just about anything because he just doesn’t get it.

And that sounds about right. That rings rather true.

I seemed a little discouraged about this, so the clerk comforted me by explaining that the root word has something to do with the wandering clerics, the friars, as in Friar Tuck. Apparently the Russian crime community has some affection for Friar Tuck but thinks him kind of slow-witted.

Well, however that might be, I bear another name, and so do you. And it is a wonderful name -- a name full of meaning, overflowing with meaning. I speak of the name “Christ.” For I am a “Christian.” I am one who bears the blessed Name of the One before whom one day all reality will bow the knee and bless themselves at the mere mention of that name.

In this sermon, I want to boast of the name “Jesus Christ,” and suggest three aspects of the meaning of that name for us. First, it is a name that “charms our fears.” Second, it is a name into which we are to grow. And third, it is name that promises a crown: a crown for Jesus, yes, but also a crown for you and me someday.

So, to my first theme, the name of Jesus Christ “charms our fears.” You might well recognize that phrase. It comes from a hymn we will be soon to sing during the Offertory for this service -- the hymn “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.”<sup>1</sup> Let me read verse three of that hymn aloud for us:

The name of Jesus *charms our fears*  
and bids our sorrows cease,  
sings music in the sinner’s ears,  
brings life and health and peace.

It is the same idea being celebrated in the first verse of our Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem”<sup>2</sup>:

O little town of Bethlehem,  
how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep  
the silent stars go by;  
yet in thy dark streets shineth  
the everlasting light.  
*The hopes and fears* of all the years  
are met in thee tonight.

For you see, Christ has something to do with our “fears” in this world. Indeed, the Epistle to the Hebrews rejoices to spell out the most holy Gospel of our Savior Jesus Christ using the language of fear, the overcoming of fear:

<sup>14</sup>Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, <sup>15</sup>and deliver all those who *through fear of death* were subject to lifelong bondage. (Hebrews 2:14-15, RSV)

St. Paul rejoices in the same thing in his saying about the sting of death:

<sup>55</sup>O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Corinthians 15:55, KJV)

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<sup>1</sup> A hymn of Charles Wesley, 1707-1788. LBW 559.

<sup>2</sup> Text: Phillips Brooks, 1835-1893. LBW 41.

Well, there is much in this world for us to fear. We fear accidents, in which we could fall and break a hip, we fear sickness, crime, poverty, abandonment, forgetfulness, declining strength, declining time. But you bear the name of Christ, and that makes all the difference. The whole world, both believers and unbelievers alike, fears these things, these sorrows in a fallen world, but you bear the name of Jesus and so you have the right to hope in face of these sorrows.

Let me move on to a second part of the meaning of the name “Christ.” We are called Christians, and that we are. But the name signifies not only our Saviour who “charms our fears” but also our life’s task in this world. You and I have our duties, same as the rest of the world, but underlying all of those other duties is this fundamental one: we should bear the name of Christ with integrity. The name of Christ should not be given to us uselessly, but rather as a picture of the man, the woman, we ought to become. And so it is that when we awaken in the morning and wipe the sleep from our eyes, we should recall the name of Christ, and take that name as that day’s assignment: that is, we are to become more Christ-like. We are to let the image of the One whose name we bear take shape in us, even in us, day by day.

Part of the joy of this particular liturgy is that one of our sisters in the Lord, Elizabeth Simon, is about to join our congregation by way of Affirmation of Baptism. In doing this, Elizabeth will be saying to us and to the One whose name she bears, that she is a Christian, that she is proud to be a Christian, that she means to bear the name of Christ with even more earnestness as she goes forward, and that she means to “walk as becomes the Gospel of Christ.” In this way, she is starting off this new year stretching before us in the best of ways: by claiming the blessed name of Jesus Christ and by meaning to grow into that name.

And the final thing I want to say about the name of Christ is that it is a name that radiates the hope of heaven someday.

In our Second Lesson, we read about the exaltation of Jesus Christ. In the first half of the reading, St. Paul speaks of divine condescension, according to which Jesus leaves heaven and becomes a human being, same of you and me. That exposes him to the assault of sin, death, and the devil, same as you and me. But, unlike you and me, he goes through his entire life innocent and pure and therefore, though many people in his life mocked him and opposed him, God himself has “highly exalted” him. And so we come to this morning’s text:

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, <sup>10</sup>that *at the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11, RSV)

Almighty God has established Jesus as King of kings and Lord of lords.

But in doing so, Almighty God has also opened himself to making *you* royalty too. For you belong with Christ, and where he is, you will be too. If he now dwells in heaven's palace, that is your natural home and destiny too.

And so it is that at the end of a long, discouraging, and exhausting ministry, St. Paul is able to look beyond his earthly years and to think of a heavenly crown:

<sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Henceforth there is laid up for me *the crown of righteousness*, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:7-8, RSV)

The name "Gregory" is not important. The name "Fryer" is not meaningful, whatever the Russian clerks might think. But the name "Christ" -- ahh, that name is important! It means Christian morality in this world and hope in the next, through the grace and merits of him to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.