

Today we hear that the Son of God was given a name, a first name, Jesus, named just as any human child is named, typically some few days, hours, or minutes after birth.

This naming of Jesus, so ordinary, was extraordinary; it signals the proximity, the nearness, the intimacy, with humanity, which God intended by Jesus' birth.

By way of distinction, remember the God of Israel as revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, A god who often demanded a certain distance be kept by the humans who approached, after the primordial intimacy of the garden, in the first days of the innocent creation, were lost.

God's servant Moses, chief among those chosen to accomplish God's will, was told to take his shoes off and avert his gaze, to give God a certain respect, distance, a personal space befitting their different places in the hierarchy of the universe.

When Moses, being sent to collect Israel from slavery and challenge Pharaoh, asked to know just who this mysterious God was, he did not get a straight answer.

Moses wanted to know God's name, perhaps thought the divine name would be impressive or majestic; would be a charm or other magic, when he uttered it during his work as God's prophet. Yet God told him only, "I am who I am," a riddle name, not readily pronounceable, never spoken by some of the Jews.

And not a personal name, not like Ba'al, Zeus, or Shiva.

Much has been made of this mysterious name or no-name over the years by philosophers and others, some saying that a god called "I am who I am" is a god who claims to be the ground of all being, the divine spark within.

And some in recent years have carried that thought forward, thinking about God in impersonal ways, thinking of God as being, as life force, as the power within all living things.

This impersonal god, this nameless god works for some in our age.

Yet I don't think that the story of Moses in relationship and conversation with God, reveals a God of general being-ness, an impersonal God, so much as it does a very personal god, one who desires to know us, to share life with us,

a God certainly wise to our ways after the fall

and so resolved to be God, beyond our imagining as well.

If God is only a vague life force, a nameless and beneficent being-ness,

I think I would have stayed out later last night and slept in earlier this New Year's morning.

So we see today that whatever distance this God, who would not share his name with Moses, kept from us, was dramatically reduced by the birth of Christ, who they called Jesus.

In him, God has been willing to be called by as name, as Peggy, Frank, Jan, and Joe are called.

And called by such a name to be so much more familiar to his people.

Formerly approached by a high priest in the Temple in Jerusalem on the holiest day of the year, this God called by the names of Jesus has promised to show up whenever two or three are gathered in his name,

to be with us to the end of the age,

to give us what we ask in his name,
to feed us with his spiritual body and blood whenever we gather and call his name over the table of thanksgiving.

The God who reserved the full showing of his identity from Moses has shared the fullness of himself in the one who is named Jesus.

I'd draw two practical points from the revelation of names of Jesus for this new year.

If you have felt that God is hard to know, if you have delayed knowing God through Jesus, know that God has done just about all that God can to facilitate your discovery of him.

Take up the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament, deepen your engagement with the shared life of this church, and take seriously Jesus' word that he is revealed to you and can be known in the poor, hungry, and broken-hearted.

God, in Jesus, is all around and invites you to know him.

Sometimes we speak of God shrouded in the darkness of mystery; sometimes God has been and still is

But know also that God has revealed Godself as fully as needed in the one named Jesus.

You can learn all the necessary mysteries of God and the universe by knowing him.

The others and also personal invitation in the giving of the names of Jesus is to a more expressive and revelatory humanity.

If God has given us his name in the name in the name of Jesus, it will not do for us not to know the names of our neighbors or our sisters and brothers in the church.

If God has given us his name in the name in the name of Jesus, it will not do for us to hide behind concepts like privacy or to know only those we already know and never expand our networks.

It will not do for us to hold ourselves back from deep engagement with the rest of humanity.

We who have been included in the life of God and ought to be quick to share our names, our handshake, our embrace, and concern with others whom God so loves.

Post-modern life, even in a small community, seems to invite anonymity; the Gospel of Jesus invites introduction and relationship.

This new year, like the old one, will have its moments of trial and triumph, of tragedy and transcendence.

This new year, like all those that have gone before, will need a people to whom God revealed himself, to practice the mercy, forgiveness, and ways of celebration that help others find their way into the life of God.

It will need a people who have received the revelation of God in Christ to let God reveal himself anew to the world in them.