

*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.*

Those are the words that God spoke to Moses, instructing him about what he should say to his brother Aaron and his sons about what they should say to God's unruly, decades-in-the-desert people. God ends that instruction with this potent sentence: "So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them."

In the days since we gathered here on Christmas Eve, 2022, I've had some blessing myself. I don't mean to make light of the blessing that we share when God's name is put upon us. In fact, the blessing of rest that I've enjoyed in the last few days is, I believe, part and parcel of Holy blessing. If we are named as God's own, then surely it follows that we are to care for ourselves as creatures as sacred as any in the universe, and I've been grateful for the rest, and for the opportunity to do something that completely eluded me in the month between the time I began my ministry with you here on November 27 and a month later on Christmas Eve: this past week, I got a chance to read again.

That reading was sometimes frivolous, sometimes just for fun. Sometimes, though, it was more serious; and as is sometimes

the case when I read random serious things, I came across an essay--a meditation really--ostensibly about a new edition of Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, containing an introduction by the author. More than a book review, the essay, "Eyes That Bite," by Anne Enright, tackles the subject of how writing and reading work, as joint enterprises of empathy and imagination, and specifically how they work in Morrison's early novel.

Enright is also thinking, as I find myself often thinking also, about how reading as an exercise in imagination and its product, empathy, are being affected by how we, in 2023, process information, how we manage words, whether in fact words can much longer have the power long inherent in them to capture and magnify, or if not capture, at least point to, to signify a particular reality: an orange, say, meaning what we all know it means, which is different from an apple, or from the sky, or from a house.

I know that's kind of esoteric for a New Year's Day homily, but bear with me, for our subject today is after all names, and in particular, one name--the name of the Holy One made flesh, Jesus.

Here is what Enright says early in her essay: "Reading does, in some way, hold us together. According to the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, it is connective across various neural circuits and involves large areas of the brain. Our

understanding is predictive and feels instantaneous; it can also be metacognitive, co-creative and generative. Reading is an evolving skill that begins with simple decoding and ends, according to Wolf, with empathy and those ‘blessed moments’ afforded by immersion in which we attain insight, or new levels of understanding.”

And then, Enright goes on to say, again quoting Wolf, that there’s a tiny little area in our brains that lights up bright as the Magi’s star “...to the newness of a literary metaphor....” Apparently this is the same part of our brains where insight--a new way of understanding reality--may be seated.

I’m thinking, as I read this essay, that much of the same thing must hold true for story-telling, for the oral tradition that was for a very long time how we described and understood ourselves, and how, in fact, many people still do. Storytelling, in any form, must, I think, trigger those parts of our brain out of which are born empathy, imagination, and insight.

Thus, when God, whose Name may not be spoken in our ancient Hebrew ancestral history, when the Holy One says to Moses that the divine Name is to be put on those Israelites, our spiritual ancestors, I’m thinking that the experience of having the Name of God put on them must have been incredibly, probably fearfully, powerful. I can imagine that little part of those ancient brains that sat “in the right hemisphere’s

superior temporal gyrus...” just glowing as that Name is put on those brains for the first time.

Who can say what happened out of that new understanding? We know that a story began to unfold that eventually spanned the globe and captured, for good and ill, the imaginations of millions, and that out of that story and embedded in it, a faith was born and grew and evolved that landed in Bethlehem of Judaea just over 2000 years ago. And we know that in our story, that Name, that Word, became human, and was named again, this time with a very human, very common name, Jesus, that could be said by anyone, anywhere, anytime. And we know the story of that Word made Flesh, that Jesus; and we'll tell it again over the next three months or so.

But what concerns me, and interests me, is how we find ways of telling that story that continue to light on the sources in our human brains of imagination, empathy, and insight, and faith. Neuroscientist Wolf, according to essayist Enright, says that “...the shift to digital has made skimming [rather than reading or extended storytelling and listening] the new norm. Scrolling and swiping have increased our ability to survey large amounts of information, but they do not engage those areas of the...brain where we imagine and are moved by the lives of others. We have, in neurological terms, an app for that and it is no longer being switched on.”

So today, in our story, Mary's son is eight days old, and the time has come for him to be circumcised and properly named, with the name that came into his mother's brain when she and an angel of God conversed some nine months prior: Jesus.

Jesus will go on to live what was almost certainly, for most of it, a more or less ordinary life in his time and place, until somehow he lights up with the fire of God and everything changes.

Soon Epiphany will be here. Those Wise Men will reach Bethlehem. Our job will be to find ways, in this new year, to tell the name of Jesus into a digital world. Will the Word, the Name itself, by itself, be powerful enough to fire up the empathy and love of those with whom we actually share the world in 2023?

I believe God put the Holy Name on the people of God long ago so that they could bear the blessing of that Name into the future, each generation finding new words, new languages, new ways of telling and enacting the story of God's grace and peace and love.

I wonder how we will tell God's Name, how we will live and speak the name of Jesus, into the reality in which we live, so

that the crevasses of our craniums will light up with the fire of God's radical empathy and huge love, and send us into the blessing and ministry of being God's people in 2023? I wonder what the name of Blessing will be for us this year?

For God says, I will put my Name on you, and I will bless you. May it be so. Amen..