

A Sermon Preached by the Reverend Carole Johannsen
Saint Augustine's Episcopal Church
Croton-on-Hudson, New York
The Feast of the Holy Name (Year B) – January 1, 2006

If you were to drive toward Hartford on Interstate 84, just outside of Danbury you'd see a large billboard on the right, set up on a hill. Most of the year the billboard holds some easily-forgettable commercial message, but around Christmas the owner, a practicing Christian, always displays a Christmas message. I'm not usually a fan of evangelical billboards, but one year the message was so elegantly simple that it stayed in my mind long after I had driven past it.

The background was plain white, and written across the top in thick, bright-red, block letters were the words: "I LOVE YOU." Under that, written at an angle across the center of the board in green paint, was the signature: *Jesus*.

It was that simple: "I LOVE YOU." Signed: "*Jesus*."

This is the feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord, what the old prayer book called the Feast of the Circumcision. It commemorates Jesus being taken to the Temple for the ritual that would make him an official member of his people – a Jew. We emphasize the *naming* of the infant Jesus -- in Aramaic, his language, Jesus is ***Jeshua bar Josef - Jeshua***, from the Hebrew, ***Joshua***, which means "the one who saves," the savior. Jesus is our salvation, the One sent to redeem us, to keep us from falling away from God into an abyss of sinfulness.

But the celebration of his naming not only reminds us of who *he* is, but of who *we* are: we are the ones who bear his name: Christians, the followers of the Christ, the Messiah of God. For the last week, we have been telling and retelling the story of his birth in a manger, under a great star that drew humble shepherds to worship him. This week, on Epiphany, we'll also remember the magi who traveled far to see him. But let's not forget that this story is also *our* story. We are the ones directed not only to tell the old story, but to retell it again and again by the way we live our lives. We are the ones who are given his name in baptism - "Carole, a Christian" - We are the ones who carry his name into the world.

Back to that billboard for a moment: There is a post-script to the story. Within a very short time after the message appeared on the billboard, even before Christmas arrived, graffiti "artists" had painted their signatures over the white board, obliterating the name of Jesus. How sad, I thought at the time: that billboard had been so effective. But at the same time, how predictable that the world would cover over the holy name. After all, Jesus is not allowed in much of our society anymore, except perhaps as an expletive. To use contemporary vernacular: Jesus is being "dissed" (disrespected) every day.

That doesn't make it easy for those of us who bear his name, but then, no one ever said that being a Christian was going to be easy. In this week following Christmas, the Church tries hard to tell us that the sentimentality of mangers and carols and candles is not the heart of Christmas. The heart of Christmas is that the light of Christ came into a darkened world. Christmas is not just about celebrating the light; It is also about struggling constantly against the darkness.

Take up your Book of Common Prayer and turn to page 30. This is the calendar of feasts for December, and those written in bold print, like those at the bottom of the page, are either Principal Feasts (like The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ) or major feasts.

I want you to note carefully what the Church calls us to remember before and after Christmas. On December 21, we remember St. Thomas the Apostle and remember not that he doubted, but that when Jesus insisted on going to Judea, Thomas said to his fellow disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (John 11:16)

Then on December 26, the day immediately following the feast of The Nativity, we commemorate Stephen, one of the first seven deacons and the first Christian to be martyred for his faith. He was stoned to death while preaching about Christ, and even as he was dying, he was praying for his persecutors. After Stephen's death, the Christian community in Jerusalem was so frightened of the Jewish authorities that they scattered, thereby carrying the gospel of Christ beyond Jerusalem for the first time.

Continuing down the calendar, on December 27th, we remember Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist, who was exiled for his faith. And finally, on the 28th, we commemorate the Holy Innocents, those children who died when Herod the Great, angry and frightened by the story of a newborn king told him by the Wise Men, ordered that every male child under the age of two, in Bethlehem and surrounding villages, be slaughtered.

This is not the happy, sentimental Christmas story that is the stuff of T.V. programming. The shopping malls would not know what to do with this picture. But it is as much a part of the Christmas story as the angels and shepherds and wise men following a star. It is the strong reminder that life following Christ demands constant vigilance, good courage, the support of a faith community, and the energy to keep wiping away the graffiti that the world scrawls over the name we accept as our own in Baptism.

The Presbyterian writer, Frederick Buechner, wrote this prayer that sums it up:

"Holy Child, whom the shepherds and the kings and the dumb beasts adored, be born again. Wherever there is boredom, wherever there is fear of failure, wherever there is temptation too strong to resist, wherever there is bitterness of heart, come, thou blessed one, with healing in thy wings.

"Saviour, be born in each of us who raises his face to thy face, not knowing fully who he is or who thou art, knowing only that thy love is beyond his knowing and that no other has the power to make him whole. Come, Lord Jesus, to each who longs for thee Come quickly. Amen." (*The Hungering Dark, 16*)

And to each of us, as we begin a new year, hopeful, expectant, and resolute: May God bless our journey, giving us the necessary grace to be the light of Christ in the darkest corners of our world. With God's love, we can do that. As the billboard said, "I LOVE YOU." Signed, "*Jesus.*" It's all about love.

Happy New Year. Amen.

Readings: Exodus 34:1-8; Psalm 8; Romans 1:1-7; Luke 2:15-21.