

A Sermon by the Very Reverend Roger Wm. Smith on the Feast of the Holy Name, January 1, 2012 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

A sermon about the Holy Name of Jesus

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. — Luke 2:21

Today we celebrate two things: The New Year and The naming of Jesus. You will notice that New Years Day comes just 8 days after Christmas. Following the custom of their people Mary and Joseph had their son circumcised on the 8th day after his birth. That is when he was given the name of Jesus—we call it the *Holy Name*.

So what was so special about that name? What, after all is in a name, your name, my name?

There may be lots of reason why we should pity the new “Dear Leader” of North Korea. One of them is his name—Kim Jong Un. In our language, the prefix “UN” is a negative, meaning opposite of or contrary to.

Jesus’ name first appears in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1, verse 21, where we read that an angel appeared to Joseph, telling him it’s okay for him to take Mary as his wife. “She will bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people.”

Jesus was not named a “dear leader”, he was named the Savior.

Let’s take a minute to recall the events that preceded Jesus’ birth. In the first chapter of Luke we read that the Angel Gabriel “was sent from God to a city in the Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. The virgin’s name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed

that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed...' And Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned to her home. (1:28-56)

By the time Mary returned home her condition must have begun to be evident. When Joseph noticed it, we can well imagine that he was not happy. He certainly knew that he was not the father. He might have wondered what had been going on up in the hill country during those three months that Mary was there.

We read in Matthew's Gospel that "Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'." Matthew 1:19-21

We hear these stories so many times, I wonder if we might not miss all of the subtleties and implications in them. For example, if you had been Joseph, would you have been quite so kind? Suppose the girl you were engaged to came home from a holiday in the mountains three months pregnant? And if some apparition appeared in a dream and told you that this pregnant girl was, in fact, still a virgin and that the child she was carrying was put there by the Holy Spirit, would you believe it?

We are told that when Joseph woke from his nap, he did as the angel told him to: He took Mary as his wife and refrained from marital relations with her until her son was born. Furthermore, as directed, he named the boy Jesus. Would any of us have been so obedient and credulous?

My problem with these saints is that they were all so strong and faithful that they make us feel bad about ourselves. Most of us are not that strong or faithful. We are generally too focused on our own well-being to be concerned with that of anyone else. When I am told about people like St. Joseph, I want to cry for help. Lord, have mercy!

One thing that makes me cry for help is this Episcopal Church. When I say that I am talking about all of the folks who call themselves Episcopalians, not just the Presiding Bishop and the other major league players.

So many of us are unsure of what we believe or what is expected of us. We become quite tongue tied when it comes to witnessing to our faith.

I once listened in a conversation between two young men. They were talking about Church. One was a church-goer and the other was not. The one who doesn't attend Church wanted to know why his friend did.

"Well, er... 'um... I always have gone to Church. I was brought up to do that. I guess I feel better when I've been to Church, but to tell the truth... I never thought much about why I go. I just do."

How often do we hear Church people say that they are here because they love the Lord? Are most of us little bit shy about witnessing to our faith?

I'll never forget the parishioner who came to Church recovering from orthopedic surgery. She was unable to make it up the aisle. I asked her husband if she would like me to bring Communion to her in her pew. "Good Lord no!" he exclaimed, "That would embarrass her."

Another time two parishioners asked me if they could receive the Sacrament standing up. They were too lame to kneel. One of them actually asked if she might be forgiven if she did not kneel. Forgiven!!

God forgive us for allowing our Church to come to this. Have we become so bound by our traditions and ceremonial trivia that we don't dare depart from them? Have we allowed our rituals and ornaments to overshadow Christ? Would not the compassionate Savior feed us at his table, whether we were kneeling, standing, lying down, or walking on our hands?

I remember a conversation with a family mourning the recent loss of a loved one. It was Saturday. They wanted to go to Church the next morning. Perhaps if they came to the early service they could slip in and out quietly without being noticed. They were just not sure they could face all of those church people in this time of their great sorrow.

What happens in this church of ours? Do we frighten the suffering and sorrowing away? Have we yet to find the way to provide such people with the comforting compassion and healing of Jesus?

Have we lost our bearings? We once thought of ourselves as the church of the prestigious and powerful. We came to depend on the endowments left to us by them. We were taught in our Church History class that the two foundation stones of the Episcopal Church are the British Monarchy and the Church of England. It is from those two institutions that our church is supposed to have emerged.

Maybe that's our problem. The monarchy is a mere shadow of its former self, and the Churches in England are all nearly empty. And the powerful and prestigious have lost interest in sitting in their family pews in order to demonstrate who they are.

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When the angel told St. Joseph to go ahead and marry that pregnant girl, he also told him to name her child Jesus. "You must give him that name because he will save his people from their sins."

The angel would not have pronounced the holy name as Jesus, but as JE HOSH UAH, or Joshua. That's Hebrew, meaning God saves. It is a name with a promise.

The people of first century Israel felt like their world was falling apart, so the name of this boy child to be born was a promise that help was on the way.

Of this promise, years later the Apostle Peter would proclaim that "there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." Acts. 4:12b

Saved from what?

Saved from ourselves... We're pretty sure we aren't faithful and strong like the saints of old. But, you know what? Neither were they! They were folks just like us, and they needed all the help they could get; they got it from Jesus the Savior. If we are too lame to make it up the aisle, Jesus will come to where we are. If we are too lame to dance, his touch can cause us to leap like a gazelle.

If we are so self-centered in our thinking, our words, and our actions that we are feeling guilty—feeling not at all like the saints of old, we can confess it and admit that we need help—all the help we can get. That kind of help is called forgiveness, and it is ours for the asking. Once granted, this kind of help erases —wipes out forever—all of that nasty stuff.

Of course, we have to believe it will in order to have it happen. It doesn't make much sense to ask forgiveness from Jesus and then turn around and refuse to forgive ourselves. We are called to accept this help (perhaps even singing something like *Joy to the World*)—accept it as something real and unmistakable as a new born baby.

And what about the Episcopalians? Perhaps we need to focus less on our majestic Anglican heritage and rediscover that Christ is our sure foundation. He is our Savior, our JE HOSH UA, the one who answers when we cry for help.

Let us pray.

Good and gracious God, we see ahead of us 365 brand new days. Each one of them is a gift from you. We pray that we might devote all of them, not to our own praise and glory, but to yours. Let each day be lived as an act of thanksgiving to you, who gave us your son Jesus to save us from ourselves and strengthen our self-confidence, and whose blessed name is hallowed for ever and ever. Amen