

Something for Everyone
The Epiphany of Our Lord - January 6, 2011
Matthew 2:1-12

One problem with the Christmas story is that we think we know all about it. Angels, shepherds, and 3 wise men all gather on the same night in a Bethlehem stable to see Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus. The fact that Luke's account has no wise men; Matthew's account has no shepherds and doesn't number or name the wise men; Luke mentions a manger but not an actual stable; and Matthew talks about a house, not an inn, stable *or* manger - well somehow that goes right over our heads!

When we hear even a portion of these Gospel stories, we recall church Christmas pageants with darling children; our favorite Nativity set; and countless Christmas cards featuring a well-scrubbed stable; clean critters; trackless snow; couth shepherds; angels with really cool wings; ethnically-diverse wise men; and totally unfrazzled parents of a cherubic, rosy-cheeked baby. The birth of Jesus can seem unreal after a while - more like a Hallmark card than real life.

But think about the people actually present in the story. Joseph was a carpenter: not a wealthy man but not impoverished. He was a craftsman whose skills were always needed, even when he fled with Mary and Jesus into Egypt. The shepherds were further down the socioeconomic ladder. Today they'd be the equivalent of trash haulers,

janitors, or hospital orderlies - performing a necessary, dirty, thankless job in uncomfortable conditions for little pay. King Herod and his court are comparable to a politician with his "inside the beltway" staff; the religious elite were probably more academic than pastoral in nature; and the magi - well, they were exotic, wealthy, and foreign. Matthew further broadens the cast of characters by saying that all Jerusalem was abuzz when the magi arrived in Herod's court. Rich, poor, Gentile, Jew: this story contains real people of every sort.

Now, "real people of every sort" are fine; but they *always* come with a wide variety of experiences, opinions, beliefs, and priorities. That can create friction; most wars - and, let's face it, most interpersonal misunderstandings - occur when one set of beliefs and priorities collides with another and neither party will back down.

War, arguments, fist fights, and divorce aren't particularly good remedies for this kind of friction. These days, respect and tolerance are highly valued. It's drilled into our heads that *nobody's* experience, opinion, belief or priority is to be considered less real, true, or legitimate than anyone else's. You've probably seen that bumper sticker that reads "Coexist", where all the letters are made from symbols of various religions. It's related to the firmly-held belief of many: that there is no such thing as absolute truth (much less one absolute deity). Jesus may be the Way for Christians to achieve salvation; but Muslims,

Buddhists, Wiccans, Sikhs, Jews, Hindus, and everyone else has their own path to follow; and the "salvation" they receive is whatever it is their path leads to.

Now, all of that makes this Epiphany story rather interesting when we consider the cast of characters present. Let's leave aside those good Jews, Mary, Joseph and their baby boy Jesus for a moment; ditto with the shepherds. Let's look at the theological diversity in the story. Think about those magi, for example. They were astrologers from Babylon or Persia; as our Thursday morning Bible study has learned, they not only sought truth and wisdom from the stars but also worshipped a constellation of deities. Why in heaven's name were they seeking out an infant king of a foreign country whose people worshipped an alien god? In fact, why did *they* worship the infant Jesus, if all they believed was that he was an earthly king?

Herod was a half-Jew by birth, and nominally a Jew by faith. But it's safe to say he worshipped the triune god, "Me, Myself, and I" - or possibly "Wealth, Power, and Expediency." His court scholars could research and quote Scripture, but it's doubtful that they believed it. But they're pivotal to the story, for no matter what their personal beliefs (and no matter how Herod abused that knowledge), they could accurately and broad-mindedly provide the necessary information

about traditional messianic beliefs. Given the time and place, it almost seems like Matthew did a good job of lifting up that "Coexist" banner!

There's another odd point to be made. Let's call those shepherds back in for a moment. Though they were undoubtedly good Jews, their constant contact with dirt and crud (associated with animal care) made them almost perpetually ritually unclean. Oops. The wise men, being gentiles, were unclean by definition. Double oops. Mary and Joseph were devout Jews - but Mary was ritually unclean for 40 days after childbirth. Since Joseph undoubtedly assisted her, so was he (though for a shorter period of time). Another oops. In fact, the only ritually clean folks in the story were probably - you guessed it - Herod and his scholars, and they wouldn't touch Jesus with a 10-foot pole - though they were okay trying to use a centurion's sword. This story is landmined with oopses!

What the heck is going on here? The Christmas and Epiphany stories are chock-full of assorted folks from varied backgrounds; they're clearly representative of the broad spectrum of humanity. And yet it seems that all the wrong people are given the revelation; are at the manger or stable or house in Bethlehem; and receive the great good news of God's saving work!

The one thing we should *not* conclude (much less believe, teach, preach and confess) is that, given this odd, inclusive, and oops-laden story, that therefore tolerance, relativism and inclusivity are at the *heart* of the Good News. We aren't given free license to assume that everyone's beliefs are equally valid; everyone's lifestyles are equally acceptable; everyone's conception of reality and redemption are equally true, and everyone's god is equally real.

In fact, far from it. St. Matthew *isn't making a point* about diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance, even though, from this grand beginning to its marvelous end - you know, "Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations...*" Matthew's Gospel is addressed to a breathtakingly inclusive audience.

His point is that the God of the Jews - the one painted by many people, past and present, as a rather cranky, tetchy sort of deity, jealous, high-handed and a real bear about being manipulated or crossed - this God single-handedly, without consulting a single soul from any ethnic, religious, socioeconomic or philosophical group, has laid claim to each and every human being on the face of the planet and is now going about the business of revealing that decision to the world.

It doesn't matter what god you *had* been worshipping. It doesn't matter what allegiances or alliances *had* bound you. It doesn't matter

what baggage, experiences, opinions, beliefs, preconceived notions, agendas or anything else you *had been* carrying around previously. It doesn't even matter whether, by this same God's own laws, will and revealed command, you *had been* branded a sinner, unclean, fit only to receive divine wrath and condemnation. Those inclusivity mantras get it partly right: *God renders utterly relative everything else.*

But they also get it completely and disastrously wrong; the point isn't that someone's beliefs, actions, opinions, and situations are unimportant, or that truth is so radically relativized that only sincerity and tolerance are deemed universal. Nope. The point is that - to snitch a line from St. John - *God so loved the world, so valued each person in the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son to die for them and to save them from the consequences of their sinfulness, folly, delusion, and disobedience.*

No matter what shape our sinfulness takes, *God's really inclusive about forgiving absolutely all of it.* No matter what the specific content of our delusion, *God's really inclusive about enlightening us with the Light no darkness can overcome.* No matter what "flavor" our opinions are, *God's really inclusive about nourishing all who will receive Him with His Bread of Life and His Cup of Salvation.* No matter how exotic, weird, horrifying or entrenched our habits and experiences are, *God is really inclusive about giving us the One who is each and every*

person's Truth, Life and Way to the Father's house. No matter what labels we hang on ourselves or each other - in pride, derision, or hate - God's really inclusive about wanting to replace them all with just one label: *My beloved child, redeemed by the Passion of my beloved Son.*

That's why the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord is so critical. It is the feast in which *real/inclusivity, real/welcome, real/equality and real/tolerance* find their real origin, meaning, and grounding: In this one Child, this one Lord, this one faith, this one God, this one Way, this one Truth, this one Life.

The message isn't "Coexist." It's "Here is what's really real - for everyone. Rejoice with exceeding joy; worship this One alone; and go home by another way." That's what the truly wise always end up doing. Amen.