



January 6, 2008 Epiphany Sunday

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 2:1-12

“Strangers at the Manger”

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas, which falls on January 6th. This is the day we remember the visit of the Magi to baby Jesus and his family. The theme is the shining of God’s light through Jesus to ALL THE WORLD, clearly represented by the visitors from the east, who came from a different culture and nation.

Many things we associate with the Magi’s visit come from human interpretations, and not the Bible story itself. We are not told the Magi were kings, and the Bible doesn’t specify how many Magi visited Jesus.

There’s a story that illustrates this—it’s probably folklore and not fact, although you never know!

In a small southern town there was a nativity scene that showed great skill and talent had gone into creating it. One small feature was troubling. The three wise men were wearing fire helmets. A visitor from the north, totally unable to come up with a reason or explanation, stopped at a market on the edge of town. He asked the woman at the checkout counter about the helmets. “You Yankees never do read the Bible!” she exploded. The visitor assured her he did, but couldn’t recall anything about firemen in the Bible. She grabbed her Bible from under the counter, ruffled through some pages and finally jabbed her finger at a passage. “See,” she said, turning the page to the visitor, “it says right here: ‘The wise men came from afar.’”

We need to accept that we don't have all the details we might like about the visit of the wise ones from "afar". Still, the story we do have brings alive important messages to us today.

What message do these wise ones from "afar" bring us?

Like the wise men, we are invited to offer gifts to Christ. We are encouraged to ask ourselves, "What gift can I bring to Christ?" We wonder, "What gifts are 'fit for a king'?" Christmas songs grapple with this: the Little Drummer Boy gives his talent- he plays his drum. "In the Bleak Midwinter": concludes with these words: "if I were a shepherd, I'd bring him a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what can I bring him: give him my heart"

It IS appropriate to think about what we will give our Lord. Giving Jesus our hearts IS the gift he wants. How do we do that? Today I'd like to suggest ONE way we DO that--- one way we give Christ our hearts. Let's think about this question: "What would Jesus do?"

I propose that asking this question, listening for a reply, acting on the reply-----
all these are part of giving Christ our HEARTS- inviting him to be in charge of our thoughts, attitudes and actions each day, every day.

So- let's think about the Scripture from that perspective. Let's shift from thinking about being like the MAGI (gift bringers & worshippers) and start thinking about how we might BE LIKE JESUS and DO WHAT HE DOES. Let's give him the gift of focusing on BECOMING LIKE HIM—which is his plan for each of our lives.

What did Jesus do, in the first days of his life?

-He welcomed STRANGERS TO THE MANGER when the shepherds came.

Storyteller Garrison Keilor likens shepherds to parking lot attendants today- doing work outside in the cold, work that's not highly esteemed by society. Harry Wendt reminds us that shepherds in Christ's time were not permitted to testify in court. It was believed they didn't have the respectability, honesty or brain power needed to be trusted.

-Jesus welcomed STRANGERS TO THE MANGER again, when seekers from the east came to Bethlehem.

These folks were all GENTILES. Gentiles were relegated to the outer parts of the Jerusalem temple. They did not live with, eat with or marry within the Jewish community.

-YET, Scripture tells us THESE PEOPLE were the ones paying attention to God's messages about a Savior. And the Christ child & family received them with grace, warmth and welcome.

SO- If we're going to give the gift of BECOMING LIKE HIM, to Jesus this year, —how can WE welcome strangers?

We need to recognize OUTSIDER-INSIDER groupings we mentally establish.

There are millions of ways we make insider-outsider groups:

1. My childhood gossiping elicited an old Quaker proverb from my father: "everyone's queer except me and thee; and sometimes I think thee a bit queer."
2. As a teen I told my mother I would never date a man who has a tattoo. She lit into me telling me she knew a lot of really sweet guys during WWII, who impulsively got tattoos during an evening's shore leave. Good thing I changed my attitude: One of my sons now has a tasteful tattoo on his back, showing a graceful bird in flight in front of a setting sun.

3. Foreigners=outsiders

Being married to one has made me somewhat sensitive to this attitude.

-In college I saw students switching lab sections when the TA turned out to be a person speaking in accented English.

-Korean clergy friends have told me stories of how they are treated like they just landed here last Tuesday, when in reality they've lived here 10-15 years AS CITIZENS.

-I lived as a foreigner several times in my life—which REALLY gives you a new perspective.

-I had pretty much ignored my father's foreign students and their families until MY family lived in Vienna, Austria when I was 13. After that- I was at the door smiling, shaking hands and taking any kids under my wing, when his foreign students and families visited our home in Lincoln, NE. I remember an 11 year old Turkish girl who was trying to teach me a few Turkish words. The poor girl- her eyes dribbled tears as she rolled on the carpet with laughter at my attempts. SHE learned English, of course, and graduated from MIT a few years back.

I lived in Quebec with a sick baby.

I lived in Germany with another sick baby.

This REALLY opens your eyes to the Insider-Outsider experience—dealing with doctors, hospitals, all in another language!

-You know, the Wise men—I wonder what language they spoke? Probably not the Aramaic spoken by Mary and Joseph

-We don't have to leave the US to run into these issues- what about the north and south of our own country- and the kings who came from "a far"? We really GOOD at dividing ourselves up, and poking fun at each other, aren't we?

How many of you have seen the film classic "A Christmas Story"?

It's about a family with two little boys back in the early 1950's. The oldest has his heart set on getting a BBgun for Christmas. Numerous adults repeat the same refrain to him: "You'll SHOOT YOUR EYE OUT!"

Through many escapades the family arrives at Christmas Day. The boy DOES RECEIVE THE GIFT he yearned for—his father came through for him at the last minute. But Christmas is disrupted by neighborhood dogs that manage to enter the house and devour the Christmas turkey. The family heads out to a restaurant, finding only a Chinese restaurant open. They order roast duck.

If you've never seen the film, rent it sometime this month. The scene in the restaurant is worth the price of the rental. When I first saw the movie I saw the Anglo family as the "insiders"--- looking at them as people welcoming Chinese "strangers" to customs of our land.

BUT THEN—I began to see the Chinese people as the gracious hosts welcoming the Anglo visitors—trying to make them comfortable by offering them an Anglo Christmas—complete with Christmas carols and roast duck. What amazing grace—what an outpouring of hospitality to this family left stranded without Christmas dinner. When the duck arrives at the table, head and all--- the host perceives the family's distress. Quickly, he whips out a cleaver and chops off the head with one neat blow. In the laughter that follows there are no more strangers remaining- and Christ receives with gladness the gift of that moment.

Friends,

- Let's be like the Magi--- and offer gifts to Christ.
- Let's be like the voice of the "Bleak Midwinter" carol: and give him our hearts.
- Let's recognize that one way we give our hearts is by asking what Jesus would do, and by following his example.
- Let's learn from the story of the Magi that Jesus welcomed strangers to the manger.
- Let's give Christ the gift of welcoming strangers in our lives.

THE ENTIRE YEAR OF 2008 lies ahead of us—and God will give us LOTS of opportunities. May his Spirit guide and stretch us- making us more and more like Christ. AMEN.

(Encourage all to visit the Karen congregation and worship with them on a Sunday afternoon. Share story of how I led a group to worship with a Korean congregation in a large church on the Elgin District. They worshipped in a building owned by an Anglo congregation. During the meal following the visit, people expressed appreciation for our coming. They told us the congregation whose church they were meeting in NEVER came to worship with them. I felt very proud—but now I am humbled, because I have not yet worshipped with the Karen people here in OUR Chapel every Sunday afternoon!

Ben Adams will have signup sheets for us to sign up to help with our next refugee family, who will be coming from North Korea/Russia, and will live in the empty apartment in the two-flat owned by the church on Cedar Ave.)