

The Second Sunday after Christmas/Epiphany

January 3, 2010

St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Boerne, Texas

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This Thursday, the day after Epiphany, Linda and I will finally take down our Christmas tree at our home in Austin. We will box up the ornaments we have collected over our forty plus years of marriage. We will remove the lights from the mantle and candles from the windows and the stockings will be put away until next December, along with the various creche scenes and angels that have adorned our home over the past month.

To many, we are about two weeks late. In many homes across America the lights were turned off and the tree came down and the decorations were put away as early as Christmas evening. But somewhere along the way in my ministry we discovered something that no one told me about in my Presbyterian childhood. The season of Epiphany. We discovered the wonderful Mexican tradition of *Los Tres Reyes*...the three kings. We discovered that the season of Christmas does not end on Christmas day but truly only begins then. And lasts until the day of Epiphany. January 6.

In these, the shortest days of the year, when the darkness seems to never end, it is then that the “true light that enlightens” our lives begins to seep into the world and make its presence felt. Softly, gently, at first. In the face of a mother and child. Then later in the faces of strangers, wandering Magi, who travel from afar to kneel and stare in awe and wonder at the glory of God among us.

Hear the Word of God as it is recorded in the 2nd chapter of the gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew tells a much different story of the birth of Jesus than does Luke. Matthew injects more suspense into his account of the birth of Jesus. In Matthew we find no angels or shepherds or inns brimming with travelers or stables filled with straw. Instead we discover a mysterious star in the East.

And mysterious Magi who follow the star to Jerusalem. There, purity, in the form of the Son of God, collides with power, in the form of Herod. And there, Matthew casts a long and dark shadow over his account of the Incarnation. A shadow that, if you read further on in chapter two, will lead you to the gruesome account of the slaughter of the innocents, which led Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus to escape into Egypt.

Epiphany is not big on calendars of most Christians”. It is the day when we in the Church follow our own star to Bethlehem and consider the mystery that surrounds the Magi...a story that has fueled the imaginations of believers over the past 2000 years..

It is a story that introduces us to the “strangers” who surround the birth of Jesus. Twenty five years ago all four of the Evans’ journeyed to Europe. We spent a week exploring the historical sites and our own personal history along the Rhine River. One day we toured Cologne, a huge city perched on the banks of the Rhine. The skyline of Cologne is dominated by the towering spire of the Cathedral, known as the Dom. There, exploring the inner recesses of the Cathedral, I discovered an obituary to the Magi. It reads:

*“Having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel
the three wise men met at Sewa (now Sebaste in Armenia) in A.D. 54
to celebrate the feast of Christmas.*

Thereupon, after the celebration of the Mass, they died:

St. Melchior on January 1st, aged 116;

St. Balthasar on January 6th, aged 112;

And St. Caspar on January 11th, aged 109.”

It is one of the many fascinating legends that surround the magi. But they all, fascinating as they are, miss the point of course. The Magi represent all the strangers and foreigners who would become part of Jesus’ world. And the point that the Magi make, and the point of the Season of Epiphany, is that the Child born in Bethlehem is intended by God to be the Lord of all. The Lord of *all*. Every nation and every race and every people on earth. All children created by the very hand of God and all children created in the image of God. The point of Epiphany is that there is nowhere on earth that we can go where we will meet a stranger. They are all brothers and sisters who seek what we seek. To kneel at the throne of grace and worship the Lord of Lord and King of Kings. These strangers reveal new mysteries about ourselves.

Every time one of you tells me that you are preparing for a trip overseas I have just a twinge of envy. And then I get over it and pray for you. I pray that perhaps you will have a life-changing encounter with a stranger who would become a friend. Or even a brother or sister in Christ. It set me thinking about all the strangers become friends who have intersected my life through the years.

In 1995 I took a small group from Shepherd of the Hills, the congregation I was then serving as pastor, on a discovery pilgrimage to Guatemala. About two weeks before we were to leave I broke my foot, running on a rocky trail that ran along the highway near our house. Thus I went to Guatemala in a removable cast that severely hampered my ability to participate in the adventures I had planned for my fellow pilgrims.

One day we drove down the mountain from Quetzaltenango to the flat and humid coastal area where the great coffee and rubber plantations are located. The agenda for the day was for the group to hike two miles into one of the *fincas*, or plantations.

The hike would require crossing several streams and following a narrow trail through the forest to a small Presbyterian congregation located in a remote section of one of the plantations. It was, of course, an impossible journey for me to take.

So, I stayed with the bus, parked on a dirt road, in the middle of a rubber plantation. Our bus driver, Byron, stayed behind to keep me company. And two little boys from a nearby village soon joined us. They were extremely curious about this *extranjero*, this American stranger, who had dropped into their village wearing a strange, blue plastic, contraption on his leg. “*Mi tobilla es quebrada*” (“my ankle is broken”) I managed to communicate in my Spanish that was as equally broken as my ankle.

I thought I would just read, but Byron had other plans. He asked if I would like to cross the bridge just down the road and walk up to the rubber trees. With a little Spanish and lots of hand gestures he explained how the rubber was harvested from the trees. He even put some of the rubber into my hands and had me roll it into a crude rubber ball.

Finally I hobbled back down to the bridge. My hands were sticky from the raw rubber and I kept rubbing them together in a vain attempt to remove the irritating stickiness. There was water flowing under the bridge, but there was no way for me to reach it. I noticed that one of the little boys disappeared for a moment. When Carlos reappeared, he held in his hand a plastic bag full of water. He held it up to me. I thought he was inviting me to drink, and though I have taken many risks as I have traveled throughout Guatemala, drinking water from a ditch was not one of them. “*No tengo sed*”, (“I am not thirsty”) I managed to say. The little boy then laughed and said, “*No, para sus manos.*” (“For your hands”).

And with that he twisted a hole in the plastic bag. Water began to flow from the bag like a faucet, and I was able to wash my hands. Only later did I realize how much Carlos had taught me that day. He taught me hospitality. Concern for this stranger who had dropped into his world. And he taught me creativity. That kindness sometimes requires creating extraordinary solutions to difficult situations. Later I recognized that I, a stranger, came into his life, and through his act of kindness he became my friend.

Epiphany is the season that begins to move us off dead-center and shows us the way to the heart of the gospel. As we read through the Epiphany gospels over the next weeks until Lent, our world-view begins to be transformed. No longer are we the center of the universe. No longer is my salvation nor your salvation the focal point of our faith. When we journey to kneel before Jesus, we should not be surprised to discover that all sorts of strangers are kneeling beside us..

When God calls, God calls us to a journey that most often leads us to strangers. And if we are even half-awake and if we are even half-open to the possibility, those strangers can become friends. And even more, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, with whom one day we will kneel together before the child who will become a crucified Savior, journeying together to that place where every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And in that day, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. AMEN