

Epiphany Sunday

For epiphany, we celebrate the light of Christ, the light that Christ brings into the world. We light candles to remind us of hope in darkness.

The passage from Matthew takes us back into the birth narrative. What happens next after the baby is born? Well, the wise travelers come from afar to offer him praise.

They see a new star. Yet another symbol of light. It is shining in the sky for all to see. And these three, whether they're astronomers or astrologists, or whatever, they follow the light. They stop at the local palace along the way. A king is born, right? So where do you go? The palace. They ask Herod, "We saw the star, where's this king?" And Herod says, "I don't know, but when you find him, let me know.... uh, so I can bow down too, yeah."

They continue on their way till they encounter that flip flop that God always surprises us with. Not the palace. A stable. Not the son of the king But a carpenter and a baby-mama with the radical ideas of justice.

Isaiah tells us that worshippers will bring gold and frankincense, precious metal and perfume. Matthew gives us a glimpse into the rest of Jesus' story; myrrh is a funeral oil, it's used to hide the smell of decay. Who gives that to a baby and its family?

This baby, this king, is different.

Not so different that the other king isn't threatened. There's not enough room in most places for two kings, and Herod makes this known. The angels warn the travelers to go home a different way. And after this passage, the angel warns the holy family that they can't stay in town too long. They're being persecuted by an oppressive regime, you could say. They go to Egypt as immigrants, as refugees. A place that used to hold their ancestors as slaves has become more hospitable to them than their own nation.

I wonder about Egypt's hospitality. Did Egypt do a census too, so they knew how many immigrants and refugees were there? Did Egyptians offer hospitality by buying some of Joseph's pieces, or by asking him to come over and repair their chairs and tables? Did they talk to Mary, or offer advice as to which market booths had the best prices? Or maybe there was a network of other Jewish refugees, who all spoke Hebrew and hung out and ate Passover together and shared challah recipes? Even after Herod died, they thought they could go back. But then they found out the new guy wasn't so hot either. But this time they didn't have to leave the country. They did have to live in a different region, though. That's how they found that little town called Nazareth, how we got to know our lord as Jesus of Nazareth.

I spent a summer in Memphis while I was in college. I was working with four other college students, living together in one house, and working at a church in town that was really two distinct congregations. One was elderly and Anglo, and the other was younger Spanish-speaking families. The pastor there had great ideas about trying to break down racial and ethnic stereotypes, about asking these two groups to work together and maybe even worship together.

We worked with the kids. We had a summer school where we tutored kids, mostly Spanish-speaking, in math and reading, so that when they returned to school in the fall, they wouldn't have forgotten everything they knew. It was pretty amazing to hear some of their stories. I remember one eight-year-old girl who couldn't come one day because she had to go with her mom to some appointment. The mom knew that her daughter spoke English better than she did, and she leaned on her daughter for help in these areas.

Some of the kids talked about living with aunts and uncles while they waited for their parents to gather the money to make the trip to the US. Their parents sent the kids first because they wanted them out sooner rather than later.

You know, the Christ child and his family didn't only allow one kind of people come to visit. They welcomed shepherds. They welcomed these Easterners. Not only were these people not all locals, they're also not all Jews.

We know Jesus talked to Samaritans. To Romans. He shared his miracles with them, just like he did with the Jews. Jesus was an equal-opportunity healer. A man who broke down boundaries of race and ethnicity and nationality.

This John passage says he came for all. The true light, says John, enlightens everyone. (v.9)

I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that Jesus is here to shed light for you. Jesus is your light. The bad news, you may not like this so much, but the bad news is that the people you don't like, the people who make you feel uncomfortable, the people who don't look like you or talk like you... the people who don't vote like you... Jesus is their light too. Sorry.

So Mary and Joseph, while they were in Egypt, knowing who that baby was, I imagine that regardless of how the Egyptians treated them, they remembered that the baby was born for those neighbors too.

So when the astronomers came from far away... they looked different from Mary and Joseph, they spoke a different language. They worshiped a different God. But Mary and Joseph knew that the baby, that baby was there for them too.

On the other hand, consider the precarious position of Mary and Joseph and the little baby. You think of Matthew 25, where Jesus is saying, I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... you think maybe they're hypothetical. But Jesus and Mary and Joseph were in fact strangers. Maybe that led to hunger and thirst; that has certainly been the case with immigrants in other times and places.

In this town we're looking at voting on some issues of immigration and hospitality. I'm sure you've all heard of the English-Only Amendment that the county will be voting on in the next few weeks for early voting and on the 22nd. I'm sure I don't need to spell out where I'm going with this, but when you cast that vote, think about some of these issues.

When I moved here, in fact when I was interviewing, Doris told me about the high immigration population in this town. It's the largest population of Kurds outside of the Middle East, is one thing I remember her saying. I remember thinking, "So maybe Southern Hospitality is bigger than biscuits and gravy and grits and sweet tea."

So I was surprised when this English-Only Amendment came to vote. In a place so proud of its hospitality, in a place so known for being welcoming...

This is of course, only one way to make this applicable in our lives. I think it's call to consider the ways we're welcoming as a community, as a nation, even as a church. What ways do we offer hospitality to the stranger? Like the wise men honored the infant in the manger instead of a new prince in a palace, how do we honor those who may seem the least honorable? When we talk about the gift of Christ's light, do we talk about it like John, saying it's a gift for all? More importantly, do we act that way?

Martin Luther King, Jr., who fought for the rights of an oppressed people, who believed that this nation's hospitality should be extended to all, said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Let us remember the light.
And may it teach us to love.

Amen.