

Epiphany ~ In Deep Ecumenism

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

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Trinity United Ottawa

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Matthew's Wise Ones, scanning the night skies for signs. Keeping watch, like Luke's shepherds. But these men were watching with a cosmic perspective, when the sky was suddenly bright with a holy light, signifying the birthday of a great king. So they set out on a pilgrimage, following the Light to Truth in a distant land. Journeying across borders just to be in the Presence of this baby. They journeyed afar, just to pay homage to a holy one and praise God.

They were Persians, as the story goes. Wise astrologers of the Zoroastrian faith. Yet we find them on the Feast of the Epiphany, on their knees before a Hebrew Jewish babe. And they have come bearing only gifts. Come only to share in an awesome, cosmic moment. Unlike Herod, they are remarkably unthreatened by this Messiah, and their presence is utterly unthreatening. These were spiritual seekers, enlightened by their star journey to a new birth. Enlightened - so changed by this spiritual encounter with the Babe - that they returned home 'by another way.' Not converted, mind you, but led to a new insight into how God can work - even through a baby, in a distant land and a different culture.

The Epiphany of the Magi is an interfaith epiphany. Jesus' birth was a God encounter that crossed religious boundaries. A shared meeting with Emmanuel - 'God with us', by any and every name.

One of the values of today's emerging Christianity is Deep Ecumenism. Most of you are familiar with the term 'ecumenical' in reference to the crossing of boundaries and seeking of commonalities between Christian denominations. (Did you know that there are 20,000 Christian denominations?) Deep Ecumenism is the crossing of

boundaries separating different religions and spiritualities, to meet as equals and explore our common Christ. Connecting, to pay homage to the universal God experience of Emmanuel, underlying all religions.

In this second decade of the third millennium of Christianity, the Wise Ones are challenging us to learn how to live in Deep Ecumenism, that we might live into Christ's Peace on Earth. That we might continue our journey to the Kingdom of God, the Kin-dom of sustainable community in Creation.

It is not easy for Christians to come to the ecumenical table as equals. For most of Christian history, the idea of meeting with Hindu or Buddhists or Native religious on common ground, on level ground, was preposterous. Christianity, aligned with Western colonizing Empires - Roman, British, European, American - approached all other religions with an imperial superiority complex. Thus the misguided aggressive drives to denounce other religions, convert 'heathens' and proclaim 'holy wars.' We as United Church Canadians, carrying the weighty legacy of our residential school era, now know all too well the folly of enforced religious and cultural conformity, born of false Christian superiority. We have been humbled, and we clearly see the folly in continuing American Christian imperialism in the world today.

But in the last half century - its been fifty years since the seismic cultural shift of the sixties began! - mainstream Protestantism like ours has often lived with a religious inferiority complex. Our churches, sidelined from political power and cultural centrality, are so much smaller. Generations with freedom to choose often choose not to participate. Those whose Christian Development ceased at Sunday School often feel defensive about their genuine faith and keep quiet about Christianity.

In this third millennium, when our global village requires us to be neighbourly with all religions in Deep Ecumenism, we mainstream Protestants need to rebuild a healthy Christian self- esteem, to come to the interfaith table. What will rebuild our collective confidence in the Christian path?

We can get to know this Jesus whom we follow, as he is revealed by all the wisdom and scholarship of the 21st century.

We can reclaim all the goodness in Christian history, with pride. For this I recommend “ A People’s History of Christianity” by Diana Butler Bass. She has written the stories of saints and faithful people who have made Christianity a Light in the darkness of every era.

We can learn HOW to read our Bible wisely, for its wisdom, in this postmodern world. During Lent, we’ll be offering a ‘Basic Bible’ course on Monday evenings. We can practise our Christian prayer and hymn singing and meditation in a daily way, till we really recognize God’s personal presence, making our faith both strong and wise.

And above all, we can find the unconventional courage to share our Epiphanies, our experiences of the Holy in our own time, with each other and with people of other religions. ‘God with us’ is the bridge between all religions and spiritualities. Experiences of the Holy are the common root of all religions in history, and the ongoing sustenance of every spiritual path.

Every religious person can know some version of the journey to a stable where God is born. When a little Hindu girl talks about her vision of Shanti one night when she was all alone, it has the same recognizable resonance, the same awesome affect, as when a Protestant man tells about how he once felt Jesus beside him in the trenches.

To grow more confident as Christians, and more willing to travel with peoples of other faiths towards peace on earth, let us follow the Magi model. Study our own wisdom tradition. Watch for signs. Be ready to ‘travel to other lands’ if that is where the Light of Christ is shining right now.

Let our Christianity become ever more ‘homage’ based, in openness to shared encounters with the Christ in other faiths. Jesus himself ate with Samaritans. So let us be Magi who share food, bring gifts, and bend our knees. Let us venture forth to

meet foreign strangers who are also seeking God. And when we come home, let us be changed - returning enlightened, by another way.

God, make of us modern Magi. Ones who will follow Christ to peace, and meet God by any name, anywhere.