

*Sermon*

*January 5, 2014*

Today is the second Sunday of Christmas and the day before the feast of the Epiphany. It is a special transition time in the season of the church year. We still remember and celebrate God becoming human, becoming one of us. As today's collect states, through the Incarnation, God becoming one of us, God "wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature." That is why we can say "Merry Christmas" and mean it. What good news!

The transition today is to the "what happens next" with the good news. The story used in today's Gospel is about the visit of the Magi to see the child Jesus. It is a powerful story that informs us that God's good news is not limited to insiders who already know and believe. It is always about that message breaking free, sometimes in unexpected ways, and becoming more and more known throughout the world. Based on the reaction of the insiders in the Gospel for today, and too often throughout the church's history, that good news spreads despite the attitude and actions of the insiders identified with the good news.

The Magi in this story were intellectuals, identified clearly with a foreign, non-Jewish culture—maybe Persian, Ethiopian, or Arabic. They apparently knew about the stars and different religions and how to interpret them in a learned way. We're not sure how they came to know about its significance, but somehow the Magi discovered a star that pointed to the birth of a special king. Their intellectual curiosity caused them to follow their investigations wherever they led and they brought their questions to the people who should know.

Now the insiders displayed a common reaction to outsiders, to the foreign wise men and their questions: they became afraid. The current king had a logical reason for his fear about a new and special king. But the common people were afraid, too. They probably asked, "Who are these outsiders? Why are they bothering us with questions?" There is a tendency with insiders to prefer the status quo, with all its problems, rather than listen to outsiders with their questions about change.

I wonder how the lessons from the Magi translate for us today as members of the Episcopal Church. How has the good news broken free from us and others who are insiders? What reactions do we have that are based on our fears or preference for the status quo? What modern day stories-- like the ancient story of the Magi-- do we need to hear in order to open our hearts and our minds today? What are the questions we might hear from people outside the church? How will they change us as we open our community to people who are different

from us? Let me offer two possibilities from groups of people today who remind me, at least in part, of the story of the Magi of long ago:

Some of the “God-talk” most heard today exists among a surprising group of wise men and women-- scientists, especially physicists. Most scientists, of course, do not have a stake in defending the Christian faith or interpreting our Scripture and tradition to make sense with reason and their experience. But there is some uncanny overlap in what some scientists are discussing and what the church holds sacred.

One point I have read in scientific articles is a question about whether the universe is more than merely “matter in motion.” Consideration of the function of the human mind is a prime cause of those questions. Humans can observe and measure and make interpretations and create in a way that transcends the common scientific philosophy of materialism. That philosophy discounts the human soul and God as things that cannot be observed and so cannot be proven. But if these functions of the human mind transcend the limits of materialism, then there are also questions being raised about an even greater intelligence, the being identified by communities of faith as God.

So today there are scientists, and people influenced by scientists, who have doubts about their doubts and questions about life and God. They are discovering that the materialism they learned in college or grad school may not have all the answers. Like the Magi of old, they may visit our church because it is known for being more open to science. Or we may meet them at a cocktail party or a neighborhood pool or at work and strike up a conversation. Wherever we encounter these modern day wise men and women, it is important for us to engage them and listen to their questions without becoming defensive or afraid. Hopefully we will not get in their way as they seek the One we believe in. And if we’re open to them, we will undoubtedly learn from them and their questions as well.

Another echo of the story of foreign visitors who shake up the status quo comes from the people who are the fastest growing part of the Episcopal Church: people who speak Spanish as their first language. I remember a confirmation service at the Cathedral in December of 2012. We took a group down from our church and I was impressed that roughly half of the participants were Hispanic. There was so much positive energy! And yet to be honest, it felt strange, too. It didn’t fit in with some deep seated attitude about what an Episcopal confirmation service would be like.

In the biblical story of the Magi as foreign visitors, the insider group had an attitude of resistance to the new folks coming to their community. Herod was willing to help the foreign guests in their quest to find the special new king; but he also wanted to use them for his own

purposes. He wanted to keep his distance from them—they were not welcomed to become full members of the community. They were still seen as outsiders.

As our church continues to grow among Spanish-speaking people, we will face some similar issues. Will we keep separate services based on our different languages? Will we experiment with how we play together and do ministry together? Can our different languages and cultures be an opportunity to grow in mutual respect and even mutual enrichment through our common faith in Christ? We can point to some churches in our diocese that are learning these lessons and many more where we are still struggling in how we greet and welcome people who have come to us from foreign lands.

As we enter the Epiphany season and remember the visit of those foreign and wise outsiders, we are called to be open to what happens next with the good news of God's love made known through Jesus Christ. This great good news includes all of us—and because it does include all of us, it reminds us not to exclude others, no matter how different they are from us.

So as part of New Year's resolutions for 2014, let us consider this Epiphany addendum—try to meet and engage in conversation at least one person who is different from us. Perhaps an intellectual who openly questions the faith of the church, but is also open to questioning his own assumptions. Try to listen without being defensive and ask questions based on our own curiosity. Or try to meet and engage a person from another country who speaks English as a second language. Ask about their story. Listen for the similarities you can relate to and the differences you can acknowledge, learn from, and even celebrate.

When we engage people like that, we can experience the good news of God in new and different ways. We can learn that the good news is about us and what we believe; and also beyond us and any barriers we might erect. The old story of the Magi reminds us to pay attention to all the new stories God's good news coming from unexpected places. Amen.