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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
The Second Sunday of Christmas
January 5, 2020

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a;
Psalm 84:1-8;
Matthew 2:1-12

The Mystery of Christ

Two weeks ago, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, our readings told us how God would come down from heaven to dwell among us through his son, Jesus. On Christmas Day, the Incarnation of God was actualized in the story of Jesus' birth. And just last week, on the First Sunday of Christmas, John the Gospel-writer reinforces the theme of Incarnation by declaring how "the Word [literally] became flesh and lived among us." (John 1:14) It seems like God has moved from a place outside our experience, from an ethereal place—up there somewhere **[!!point up!!]**—into something more like flesh and blood—in here **[!!point to the heart!!]**. In the spirit of Christmas, Jesus is with us. Joy to the world! Alleluia!

But we're now nearly two weeks beyond Christmas Day. And in the Gospel reading from Matthew today, we're suddenly thrust into a mysterious kind of scene where *magi*, or magicians from the East, are asking questions (not singing "alleluia"), and the people on the ground—Herod, the despot king, and the Jewish chief priests and scribes—are suddenly fearful (not joyful) when they learn that they're not at the center of the story. On hearing the news of Jesus' birth, Herod feels that his power as king is at risk, while the chief priests and the scribes, the keepers of the law, feel somehow strangely marginalized by magicians who seek to "pay...homage" (Matt 2:2) to this new child-king of the Jews.

It's less than two weeks after Christmas, and the biblical story suddenly displays the worst side of human nature. Matthew whip-saws us between two emotions: It's like what we experience in church is suddenly thrust up against what we sometimes experience outside of church, in the "real world." This collision of experiences makes the story of Christ's birth seem like a tale of two cities, or at least a tale of two opposing realities: one on the inside—in church—and the other on the outside, beyond the walls of this magnificent place. Our Gospel reading reminds us that, even though the Word becomes flesh, our worst instincts, as humans, remain intact. God is in man made manifest, but sadly, the baser side of human nature remains unchanged.

"Alleluia," we sang on Christmas Eve. Our spirits soared in the midst of Christmas liturgy. But as soon as we come out of church back into the world, from the inside to the outside, we're immediately confronted with the latest jarring news: an American dronestrike on Bagdad, the political infighting over the impeachment of our President; the wildfires devastating much of the landscape in Australia; the latest assault on members of a Jewish community in New York City—just to name a few. The barrage of tragedy and bad news in a 24/7 news cycle is deafening, and the fear of losing control is only the beginning of how we can eventually find ourselves alienated from God.

You know, all the problems and issues we face these days are really, at their core, not terribly unlike what people faced in Jesus' time. So, I ask you, why can't Matthew sing a happy tune this morning? Why does he suddenly rain on our parade and go negative in the telling of the Christmas story?

I suspect that part of the answer lies in the Gospel-writer's desire to simply tell the truth about the circumstances surrounding the Incarnation. I mean, there's really no good reason to sugar-coat the story. But perhaps the real reason is to teach us all a lesson in faith by setting up a stark contrast between insiders and outsiders in the story and in real life—between the perspective of those whose faith seems to rest only in themselves and those who believe in something beyond themselves in spite of the harshness of the world all around them.

So let's break this down. On the one hand, we have the insiders—Herod and the chief priests and the scribes—who are all focused exclusively on themselves, on preserving position, power and control in established institutions like the government and the church. And, on the other hand, we have the quintessential outsiders—the magi, the pagan magicians from the East—who're focused on something outside themselves: namely, a weird and brilliant star that seems to move and direct them to a highly specific place—like the hand of God literally pointing the way to something well beyond the grasp of human understanding: a babe lying in a manger and possessing within himself the power to transform the entire human condition.

Somehow these magicians, these outsiders, seem to know that the truth rests in a place where the star ultimately points. Somehow they're led in faith to follow and be directed by a force outside of themselves. Somehow they realize that behind the mystery of the star is the "mystery of Christ," (Ephesians 3:4) which St. Paul claims in the third chapter of his letter to the Ephesians is only understood by "revelation," (Ephesians 3:3) by God's deliberate act to reveal his intent, his purpose and himself, to anyone—even someone from the outside, who in faith has ears to hear and eyes to see.

The mystery of Christ is how God speaks to each of us every day. For those of you who participate regularly in worship, perhaps you sense God speaking to you through scripture, or in the liturgy itself, or stained glass windows or music or prayer or the Eucharist.

The mystery of Christ is when we realize that we do not control the world, that God is in charge. And we stop resisting the good news of Christ and accept the fact that every step and every breath we take is but for the of grace of God and God alone.

The mystery of Christ is found when and where we least expect it: in a manger, in a stall in a small town, in a broken heart—even in a dysfunctional family, a business loss, a wake. The mystery is that Christ is in the midst—the very center—of absolutely everything that we find challenging—supporting us, loving us, saving us when we're drowning in questions and fear.

And finally, the mystery of Christ is in that moment when we simply learn to let go of our need to control everything and let God run the show—when we trust that our best efforts are good enough, and when we believe like Abraham that "God will provide." (Genesis 23.8)

In the end, the mystery of Christ is found in living a life drenched in faith...hope...and love.

Christmas has come and gone one more time. For most of us the Christmas tree has been taken down, and ornaments have been packed and returned to storage. Every *thing* has been restored to its normal place. But somehow we know, deep down inside, that through the giving of gifts and worship throughout the Christmas season—the very actions of the magicians from the East when they encountered the Christ—something has shifted in each of us. And, like the magicians, once we encounter Jesus, really encounter him, we can't go home in the same way we came. We find our home using an altogether new path. And the mystery of Christ seems less and less like a mystery at all, but an awesome, astonishing and very new reality.

Tomorrow is the Feast of the Epiphany, that moment when we pause and acknowledge the manifestation of God's presence in all things. I suspect that, as the magicians headed home after witnessing the Christ, they couldn't forget what they'd seen in that tiny stall in Bethlehem—after following that star for miles and miles over unfamiliar territory. As they journeyed home, they must have been awakened to a new truth in their lives: that they came as pagans but left as Christians. And while God made his presence known in one place, and at one highly specific point in time, on reflection they must have realized that he'd been with them every step of the way on their long and eventful journey.

In Jesus, God is in man made manifest. But here's the epiphany: he lights the path for *everyone*, who follows him and seeks the truth of his saving grace. After Christmas, nothing is the same: God is everywhere after the experience of the birth of Christ.

And this is a mystery worth embracing.

Thanks be to God.