

DISCOVERING CHRIST

(01/14/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 2:1-12; 7:7-8; John 1:1-14

“He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:1-2)

Last Sunday, when church was cancelled because of the snowstorm, was the second Sunday after Christmas. It was the Sunday following January 6, the day when the Western Church celebrates the festival of Epiphany. Christian holidays have a history. Since they are grounded in the life of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament, we assume that they were celebrated from the very earliest days of the church. This is not the case!

Take Christmas, for example. Christmas is the annual festival commemorating the birth of Jesus. It is celebrated on December 25 in all churches except the Church of Armenia, which celebrates it on January 6. I bet most of you didn't know that. Since my wife is Armenian, I am tempted to say something about the well-documented Armenian tendency to be different, but since Darlene is here this morning, and may even be listening, I will restrain myself!

It is interesting that the first books of the New Testament, the letters of Paul, make no mention of Jesus' birth. Either there was no information available concerning it, or Paul did not consider it of any importance. It was only later, as the empty spaces in the mystery of the God-man's life began to be filled in with eye-witness accounts and a plethora of archetypal projections of divinity onto Jesus, that the descriptions of events like Jesus' birth became more detailed and mythological. This began late in the first century.

Even the four gospels differ in their treatment of the nativity. The Gospel of Mark, the first gospel to be written, does not mention Jesus' birth. Matthew, who alone includes the visit of the three wise men, was the first to describe it. Luke goes into much more detail, including word-for-word conversations. Then John, the last of the gospels to be written, once again does not mention the nativity.

The first time the nativity was actually celebrated was in the early 3rd century. It blended together the commemoration of Christ's birth, his baptism, and the visit of the Magi. The celebration took place on January 6, the common date of observance for the next few centuries throughout the Christian world.

The most widely accepted theory on the selection of December 25 for the celebration of Christmas is that this date was the date of a major pagan festival marking the winter solstice, the sun's triumph over darkness. This festival was celebrated on the first day of winter, which in the 4th century was believed to be December 25.

When, thanks to the Holy Roman Empire, Christianity spread throughout Europe, this pagan festival was replaced by Christmas, and Christians began to apply the term “Sun of Righteousness” (from Malachi 4:2) to Christ. Note that the word is “S-u-n,” not “S-o-n.” The term “Sun of Righteousness” appears in the 3rd verse of the Christmas hymn, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing:”

*Hail, the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.*

As I mentioned on Christmas Eve, this hymn connects Jesus and the rising sun, bringing light and life to everyone. It speaks to the healing that is central to our experience of Jesus.

In light of the extensive religious and secular celebration of Christmas, it is interesting that the observance of Christmas began later than several other Christian festivals. Both Easter and Epiphany were celebrated earlier than Christmas. This means that the early Christians regarded not only Easter but also Epiphany as more important than Christmas!

I’m sorry to disappoint you, but Epiphany was not originally tied to the visit of the Magi. It would have been surprising if that event would have been important enough to celebrate, and certainly surprising if the visit of three astrologers from a foreign land with their symbolic gifts was more important than the actual birth. Epiphany was originally the commemoration of Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:9) and also his first miracle, the changing of the water to wine at the wedding he attended in Cana (John 2:1-11).

The early church regarded Jesus’ baptism as more important than his birth, for many early Christians believed that this was when Jesus actually became the Christ. It is interesting in light of the emphasis placed on these events by the people who knew Jesus personally, or knew people who had walked with him, that the celebration of Christmas has come to be such a major festival for us, while Jesus’ baptism, which is celebrated the first Sunday after Epiphany, does not evoke the same degree of feeling. In fact, most Christians don’t even know what month the celebration of Jesus’ baptism is observed.

In any event, all of the dimensions of Epiphany, which is also called “Little Christmas,” come together in its meaning. Epiphany means to make known, to make manifest, to show forth. God was made known, made manifest in the birth of Jesus. God was also made known, made manifest, in Jesus’ baptism.

An epiphany is a moment of realization. The three kings who visited Jesus were wise enough to realize that something very important had happened. They journeyed in search of this transforming event, and as the British poet T. S. Eliot has said so eloquently, their lives were never the same after their visit to the manger. The dimension of realization that is associated

with an epiphany also applies to Jesus who, at the time of his baptism, either realized or began to realize what God was calling him to do and be. His life was never the same after his baptism!

The celebration of Epiphany witnesses to the importance of the discovery of Christ, whether the discovery of the Christ in Jesus, which is what the wise men discovered at the manger, or the discovery of the Christ within us, the discovery of our divinity mixed in with our humanity. The Magi discovered what others overlooked. They saw what others didn't see. They realized Jesus was the Christ, the Savior of the world. At the time of his baptism Jesus realized what others didn't realize. He knew he was the child of God; that God was living in the world of space and time through him. This kind of discovery changes one's life!

I think this is what we are searching for today. We are not searching for an institutionalized belief system; we are searching for an epiphany, a very special realization, a very special discovery. This is why I love the bumper sticker I saw several years ago:

Christianity—it's not a religion; it's a relationship!

As we discovered in our Tuesday study group, this is what the mystics have been telling us all along!

On Christmas Eve, we conclude our reading of the Christmas story with the opening passage from the first chapter of the Gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. . . .

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John tells us that the Word, the Logos, the eternal Christ, was already in the world. He was in the world from the very beginning. All creation came into being through him. So, the Word, the Christ, is already present in all creation, inside everyone, and also inside us!

Now comes the problem. Even though the Christ is present both within us and among us, most people do not know him. They have not discovered him. John tells us that to all who discover him, who open their hearts to him, he brings both life and light!

As I read this passage at our Christmas Eve service this year, I realized that the entire Christian message is about discovering Jesus! The Christian message is about epiphany. Epiphany is beautifully symbolized in the story of how the three wise men discovered the baby lying in a manger. The wise men are simply symbols of a much bigger theme. The rest of the story is about people who discover Jesus and people who don't.

It is important to note that the three wise men didn't just accidentally discover Jesus; they didn't stumble over him; they were seeking him. As recorded in the Bible, some people were not seeking Jesus; Jesus sought them, there was an encounter, and then they made their discovery. Both of these can happen to us! God through Jesus is already seeking us. In response, we set out on a journey, just as the wise men did, to discover and to build or deepen our relationship with the One who was in the world and within us all along.

This is what our church is all about. We believe that Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship. We believe that it is not a belief system, but an experience of presence in worship, in prayer, and in our daily life, a presence that transforms us and that can transform the world.

This past November, I sent an invitation to a small group of people who had become part of our church family and who were seeking to deepen their relationship with this little church. I invited them to become full members of our church. Let me share what I wrote to them because it speaks to what church membership means to all of us.

Dear _____,

It probably won't surprise you to know that we approach the matter of church membership a little differently in our church.

In many churches, you have to be in a certain place in your religious or spiritual development to be invited to become a full member of that church. In so-called creedal churches, you need to be able to assent to one of the early church creeds as an indication that your beliefs about God, Jesus, yourself, and life are consonant with the beliefs of that church or denomination.

Not surprisingly, we are a little different! We do not expect you to be anywhere as a condition for church membership! All we ask is that you, like the rest of us, realize that you are on a faith journey, that you desire to grow in the faith, to deepen your relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and to be a part of the mystical body of Christ that we call the church.

We already sense that you agree with us in this; if you didn't, you wouldn't be as involved with our church as you already are!

In our invitation to become a full member of our church, we are simply opening the door for you to be more involved in our community of faith. As you probably know, our church polity is democratic; each member can vote on matters such as calling or removing a pastor, setting the annual budget, establishing the membership of boards and committees, and deciding what we do with our property and endowment. We are simply inviting you to move even more to the center of our community's fellowship.

Please let me know whether you believe this is the right decision and the right time for you.

I think it must have worked, because every person who received this invitation decided to become a full member of our church!

The reading from John tells us that those who discover Jesus, who receive him, also discover that they are children of God. They walk in the light. Those who do not discover Jesus, or who do not receive him when he reaches out to them, walk in the darkness. They do not know who they really are, and they do not know the true meaning of life.

In the cold and barren beauty of this winter season, in the symbolism of light, in the giving of gifts to one another, and in the quiet peace that follows our busy Christmas celebrations, let us seek as the wise men did of old. Let us seek the One who is already here, already within us, who is closer to us than we are to ourselves.

Then, in the true spirit of Epiphany, let us open our hearts to receive him. Let us open our hearts that he might be born in us today. If we do this, then we, like the wise men, might discover or rediscover the Christ who is already within us but whose discovery can transform our lives.

Let us begin by opening our hearts to his presence as he is present to us, is present within us, is present among us in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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