

WHEN FAITHS COLLIDE
Matthew 2:1-12
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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I finally realized Christmas was over and done with when I went to the pharmacy on December 26th to pick up a prescription and saw, just as I walked through the door, a huge display of heart shaped boxes of chocolates for Valentines Day.

Every year it's the same. On December 26th there's a sudden atmospheric shift in the air as our Christmas fix wears off, signaling our need to get pumped up for the next big high holy day, Superbowl Sunday.

We have a curious way of rushing through meaningful holidays celebrating the sacred mysteries that keep the world God loves from spinning out of control. All the more reason to take the time to stop and listen for God revealing himself through the scriptures:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were created through him...in him was life and the life was the light...the darkness could not overcome.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth.

The Gospel of John begins by revealing the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming one of us, not by telling the story from a human point of view like Matthew and Luke but from a decidedly cosmic dimension.

According to John, God steps out from behind the veil of eternity and shows himself, allowing us to see God more clearly than ever before, no longer wondering if God the Father plays "bad cop" to the Son's "good cop." Now through Christ we clearly see both are one in the same, working together through the Holy Spirit, not demanding we die for him but beating us to the punch by dying for us first. This is the Christmas Gospel that doesn't end on December 26th, unless we let it.

Today according to the Church Calendar is the twelfth day of Christmas which always falls on January 6th.

The twelve days of Christmas isn't just a silly folk Christmas song, it's actually the continuation of Christmas beyond December 26th. Traditionally these twelve days of Christmas are symbolic of the long time it took the wise men from the East to finally accomplish their hard journey, searching for the new born king foretold to them in the stars. Interestingly, a close read of Matthew's nativity narrative reports the wise men didn't find Jesus in the stable but in a house. Apparently after an unspecified amount of

time there was finally room for them in the inn and there the Holy Family stayed until it was time to return to Nazareth.

We usually hear the story of the wise men on Christmas Eve, but it's really meant to be read today, on the twelfth day of Christmas, which by coincidence, is also Epiphany Sunday.

The word "epiphany" means to appear and be made known," so the Feast of the Epiphany is really the story of God's big reveal of himself not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles represented by the wise men.

In the opening chapter of his Gospel, Matthew went to great lengths establishing Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies and a descendant of the House of David, making him, not Herod, the real king of the Jews. But by telling the story of the wise men, Matthew also reveals Jesus to be the King of the Gentiles, a King whose sole ambition is to give himself away equally, to all the people of the earth, Jew and Gentile alike.

Unfortunately, too often some Christians claimed Jesus exclusively for themselves, unintentionally repeating the Pharisees' same mistake: challenging any expansion of God's Kingdom, believing salvation is meant only for our privileged group. But if you reread the Gospels with a Spirit let open heart and mind, you're faced with the conclusion that God's love is even more expansive and generous than anyone ever imagined.

Case in point, the wise men who came from far away, possibly Persia and Ethiopia, searching for the new born King of the Jews. They probably had some knowledge of the Jewish prophecies, but they came to Bethlehem primarily because of the movement of the stars in the heavens, which suggests God revealed himself to the wise men through their own beliefs and practices, which happened to include astrology, which by the way was forbidden in the Jewish Scriptures.

And when they worshipped him, they probably didn't fully understand this boy was actually God in the flesh. Even so, by grace alone their deepest longings were met in their encounter with this child.

After considering all that I've just said, what new insight can we take from this wonderful old story you've heard so often before? Certainly it reaffirms Jesus was born to "save his people from their sins," (Matthew 1:21) but maybe we should go further and ask the question "but are God's people just us?"

Especially now, as we become neighbors, co-workers and friends with people who come from all over the world bringing their different faiths and traditions with them, what's our gut response to them as Christians? Are we supposed to convert them? Do we believe unless they become like us God condemns them? And then this, should we

feel threatened just because they happen to be Buddhists, Hindus or Moslems, afraid they'll influence our children, even worse outnumber us?

You can be sure some Christians will mount aggressive crusades to bring these people to Christ and you may think that's a good thing. After all St. Paul was the Apostle to the Gentiles, boldly preaching Christ to both Jews and Greeks. Certainly we have the same responsibility as Paul to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But the question isn't should we, but how should we present Christ in the most effective way in this multicultural, multi-faith world we live in.

First of all and most importantly, if we're really serious about sharing the Gospel with others we need to make the commitment to intentionally grow into living the Gospel as fully as we possibly can. That means being confronted by the mystery of the incarnation, allowing the Word to envelop and live in you so his grace and truth can live through you. Then you'll find yourself resting in his presence, learning to become meek and humble yet strong and resilient. Furthermore, your innate desire to control and dominate others, making them become more like you, will give way to the desire to love and serve others so they and you become more like Jesus.

So it isn't by artfully arguing the case for Christ, but by living like Christ that the Gospel is made real to those with whom God is well pleased, no matter what their faith tradition may be.

According to Matthew, that's the message of Christmas, God reveals himself through the Child of Bethlehem to everyone, no matter what their faith and practice, inviting one and all to know, then love and finally worship him, not just on high holy days, but throughout the year, making every day an opportunity for the mystery of the incarnation to be repeated again and again because we prepare him room in our hearts.

The "official" Christmas season may be over and done with by December 26th, but for you and me, and everyone else with whom God is well pleased, be they Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish or Moslem, the mystery of the incarnation is not determined by Madison Avenue or our needy desire to recreate the perfect Christmas just like the ones we used to know.

Instead, and this may be hard to hear, but I'll say it anyway: Jesus wasn't born on Christmas Day to make us feel warm and fuzzy. Instead, Jesus was born to disturb and force us to reconsider our preconceived notions about salvation, which ironically are strangely similar to the Pharisees, who were offended by Jesus' desire to include others who didn't think and act like them.

As I grow older, the more I read and ponder the scriptures the more I'm convinced that God is greater, more inclusive and more generous with his love than I previously thought. God just didn't love the Church, God so loved the world that he gave

his only son. If that's the case, who are we to decide who's "in" and who's "out?" That's God's job, and I'm glad of it.

Having said that, may all of us keep Christmas in our hearts in spite of our limitations, with the hope that our worship of the new born king will at least equal the wise men who came searching for him from far away.