

Campbell - January 2, 2011
African Epiphany - Matthew 2:1-12

Mary Ann can tell you that for several years I have been trying to encourage our music program to do *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a short operetta telling the story of a disabled boy and his mother as they encounter the three magi en route to visit the Christ child. The young boy has a vivid imagination and tends to exaggerate, so, his mother tends to ignore when he sings that there are three kings at the door. When I took a part as one of the kings in a performance in Sierra Leone, there was a huge laugh from the audience when the boy, Amahl, sang *Mother, mother, mother come and see, there are three kings at the door, and one of them is white!*

The story of the magi is a much beloved part of the basic Christmas story. The story on appears in Matthew's gospel, the gospel most explicitly rooted in Jewish tradition. The story is very similar to hundreds of other similar stories told about the birth of notables and prophets around the time of Jesus.

Matthew gives us few details. He tells us that *magi* came *from the east*. We don't know how many magi came or from where, but where history tells us little, myth springs up with details. Most of us have grown up believing that there were three of them and that they were called Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Some traditions say they all came from the eastern Persian empire, from the Afghan city that is now called Kandahar. Another tradition says that one of them came from Arabia, one from Syria and the other from either India or China. There was a long tradition also that one of them was dark-skinned, and maybe from Africa, hence the cultural adaptation of the performance of Amahl in Sierra Leone.

Literal historical truth need not concern us here. What Matthew is trying to demonstrate, and it really is scandalous to an observant Jew, is that these three non Jews, who are perceived as men of great wisdom and learning see the value of the birth of the Messiah, when the Jewish quisling king and the temple authorities do not. This Jesus, this baby of Bethlehem, is the Messiah not just for the Jews and their followers, but rather for the whole human family. The birth of Jesus, if you like, breaks open Judaism. It ceases to be a tribal religion, for people of our kind, and it becomes a religious, spiritual, personal reality for the every child, every adult on the planet.

Jesus is born. God becomes human... the possibility emerges that every life can be made divine by the power of God's love, and every life doesn't just mean everybody in our community. All means All!

This is why we call it Epiphany. I love the fact that this very religious-sounding word has found its way into general vocabulary. Even a recent episode of *Desperate Housewives* was called *Epiphany*. We speak about a person having an "epiphany." An epiphany is an experience where suddenly the truth dawns... huge insight happens and the situation is changed.

So in every epiphany season we pray for an experience of Jesus Christ which breaks open our religious and cultural experience in such a way that the whole world may be drawn into it. Epiphany is always a day of new beginnings. It is a day of seeking relationships with people who are different in the world's eyes, but in God's eyes are sisters and brothers of the human family.

I mentioned last year as we looked at Bishop Schnase's *Five Fruitful Practices* and talked about *Radical Hospitality*, that I learned most about *Radical Hospitality* in my life, living and visiting in Africa. Wherever I have travelled in Africa I have been received with extraordinary joy and generosity. When a stranger arrives in the community, the first thing you do is to welcome them into your home as an honored guest. You then share what you have no matter how little that may be. I was deeply humbled by an Ethiopian man who saw me walking through his village, invited me into his home and shared his bread with me. This man had barely any personal possessions, but what little he did have, he shared in love. Wherever you go in Africa there is extraordinary hospitality.

The message of Epiphany is disarmingly simple... the most important realities in the universe are:

1. God's love is available in human form, and
2. You and I have been the extraordinary privilege of living and sharing that generous love with every child of the planet.

So, here we are in Campbell, on the first Sunday of the new year, 2011. And we each are absorbing the shocking reality that God's love is available in human form... and at this point in history, you and I are the people called to be Christ for others. Like the magi, you and I are called to cross the lines of nationality, race,

language, culture, food preference... you and I are called to travel spiritually to places we have never gone before and share the generous love of God.

We are excited today as we recognize that we are already a blend of different people. The church community here is in a constant state of transformation. Today we are all excited about the new relationship between Campbell UMC and the New Creation Fellowship. Who knows what God has in store for us as we live and work together building ministry in this place.

Some of us in this room are immigrants, some are not. Some of us have problems understanding each other's accents and ways... yet the tradition of this congregation, long before becoming a reconciling congregation was to say we are here for everyone, all are welcome and **all means all**. It's a good Epiphany slogan. Hospitality

I have to confess that I did have a slight problem with Bishop Schnase's book, and it starts with the title. We are invited to be **fruitful**. This sounds a little bit like the Protestant work ethic. Do things right and you will be fruitful, your church will grow. The message of Epiphany is that God has already taken the initiative, God's love has been made real in the world and in your life and mine... Epiphany invites us to share that experience with a world living in darkness. We share because we are so excited about what we have experienced that we have no choice. We are not simply trying to recruit new members... we are on fire with the faith and love we have experienced in our lives, and feel no other option but to share it.

My life is not the same life it would have been without the renewing loving work of Jesus Christ in my heart and mind and soul. And the working of god in my life doesn't give me membership in some kind of exclusive club, but rather opens up my life to a world of sisters and brothers both here and around the world.

I do believe that following the ways of love, peace and justice could seriously transform not only the world as a whole but individual human lives locked in selfishness and survival. There are hundreds, maybe thousands of people that you and I know whose lives deserve an epiphany, and you and I can be the people who share that Jesus love with them.

Let me ask each of us... do you experience the love of God in Jesus Christ in your own life in such a way that you behave differently, think differently, see other people differently? That's what it is all about... and it can never be something we keep to ourselves. It has to be shared... and the old barriers of race, language, gender identity, culture, poverty or wealth, should never get in the way. The star of Bethlehem is there for all to see.

Our theme for today is *Leading Others to the Door*. And I appeal to you today to do just that in everything you do, and, in the words of St. Francis, *only when absolutely necessary use words*.

There is an Epiphany tradition in Central Europe which you may want to try. Groups of Christians, often children dress up as the magi and go from house to house singing Christmas carols. Using chalk they will write the date of the new year... 2011, but in between the 20 and 11 they will write C+M+B, which is of course the first letter of Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, but it is also a mnemonic for *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, meaning *Christ bless this house*. They will then collect money in return for their services which traditionally has been used for poor people. Increasingly in recent decades it has been used for helping to feed hungry people around the world.

There is a Negro Spiritual that I love. The words say:

***I can tell the world about this,
I can tell the nations I'm blest,
Tell them that
Jesus made me whole,
And He brought joy, joy to my soul!***