

Christmas Eve Meditation

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 24 December 2006

Some of you come here tonight as strangers. You may never have set foot in this church before...or any church before. Perhaps you haven't been to church in years. You may only come to church on Christmas and Easter. You may enter as a stranger, *but tonight, you will leave as a stranger no more.*

Let me share with you a story about strangers and outcasts— people who weren't quite the "right" sort of people. It begins with an unwed pregnant teenager. And then there were some aliens who entered the scene...the same kind of folks the media keeps calling "illegals," as if that adjective were a noun. The homeless are in there, too. And if that's not enough, there are a few crazy people who have been alone in the hills so long they keep hearing voices. All of these people are strangers. None of them knows each other, and they are each outcasts in their own way.

You probably know the story, and maybe you think you know plenty about those strangers. You see, all of them are in that little nativity scene that you probably have underneath your Christmas tree or on your mantel at home.

You know how difficult it is to be an unwed teenage mother in our day, but think of the shame that Mary and Joseph endured in Nazareth over 2,000 years ago; women had been stoned to death for less in that culture. The consequence of being pregnant and unmarried was not just a matter of course, *it was a matter of life or death.* And when they arrive in the dusty, little hamlet of Bethlehem, they are, in essence, homeless and resort to sleeping in a cattle shed.

It would have been far more "normal" for the Christ child to have been born into a royal family in a palace...and not just to trace his lineage back to David through his worldly father and to have been born in a stable.

Thank God the borders between Judea and countries to the east weren't very patrolled, otherwise the three magi might never have made it across the border and all the way to Bethlehem. We often think of the magi as "the three wise men" or even "the three kings." But the biblical record never says calls them anything other than magi. Here is how one Greek dictionary¹ translates the word, *magi*: "seers in Persia who interpreted dreams. Any enchanter, wizard: magician: in [the] bad sense a juggler, quack." Hardly sounds like a king, does it? (If you are familiar with the Acts of the Apostles, you'll remember there is a "bad guy" named Simon the Magus.)

Now, I'm not saying all this to defame the three magi. It's just that they were not the people one would expect to understand who Jesus was and the importance of his birth. They were not Jews, and worse, they were astrologers. These were people who were ritually unclean, who could never have eaten at the table with observant Jews. And yet, here they were at the birth of the messiah! These three aliens actually understood... they got it!

And what of the shepherds? It was to them that the angel Gabriel first announced the good news of Jesus' birth. We have all kinds of wonderfully romantic ideas about who the shepherds were. There is a whole subset of Christmas carols devoted to the shepherds, who are seen as the trust-worthy, simple folk who first received the message. And perhaps that's true. Though, being a shepherd in first-century Judea was a lonely, dirty, difficult occupation...certainly a career you wouldn't want to have. But most of the shepherds were born into one of a handful of interrelated clans that controlled shepherding.

¹ George Ricker Berry, *The Classic Greek Dictionary*. (Chicago: Follett, 1962).

Imagine yourself out on a lonely hillside with the company of your sheep, and only a sling, a staff, and perhaps a small club to protect you and your flock from predators. Imagine being out in the open on a cold night. Imagine going for days without talking to another person. People might think you were a little nuts for talking to yourself, and maybe even hearing voices. And when you did see people they probably looked down on you because you were filthy and smelled like sheep; you had to keep tending your flock on the Sabbath and you were considered to be in the category of “sinner” because of your occupation.

So, why on earth did Gabriel choose shepherds as the first people he told about Jesus? They were unlikely candidates for Gabriel’s annunciation, because others wouldn’t want to be around them, and probably thought they were just hearing voices again. But like the other characters in our story, they are outsiders. And like the other members of the cast, they understood that there was something wonderfully important going on!

So, the cast of strangers is assembled in our story . . . minus one. There is the protagonist. The messiah comes to us in a stable, not in a palace; he comes as the prince of peace, not the bringer of war; he dines with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors; he turns the conventional wisdom on its head when he says that the poor are blessed and that the first will be last and the last will be first.

And when you entered those doors this evening, **you** joined the rather unlikely cast of this play. The Christ child is born, and we – all of us, in our imperfection – come to worship and adore him. You and I may not be pure as the driven snow, we may have done some rotten things, and we may be unlikely candidates for sainthood, you and I are drawn here tonight for the same reason: not so that we can prove our holiness, but so that we can share and celebrate the presence of Christ in our midst.

Plymouth is not an exclusive country club for the righteous; it’s more like a hospital for sinners: those of us who don’t have all the answers and who are not free from impurities. Whatever miserable thing you have done to yourself or to someone else, you are welcome here. You don’t need to be holy to come to this table . . . this is Christ’s table, to which the nuisances and nobodies of society are welcome . . . where kings dine with peasants, CEOs dine with the homeless, and saints dine with sinners.

You are welcome at this table, whether you are an outsider from the hills who hears voices, whether you are an unwed teenage mother, or whether you have entered this country without a green card. You are welcome to this table no matter how grave your sin, no matter how much you think yourself unworthy. For it is to imperfect people like you and like me that God has come in human form. So, come let us adore him and share in this, his table, even you who are outsiders, so that we can be strangers no more.

Amen.