

Sharers in the Promise

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12; Psalm 72:1-7; 10-14 1-06-08

As our church year continues to roll along we have come to Epiphany or Twelfth Night. Our gospel story tells us that this is the day the wise men found Jesus and Mary. We do not know just when this occurred—many believe that this possibly took place when Jesus was a toddler—about 2-3 years of age. At this time, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were bestowed on Jesus according to our tradition. But, the meaning of this event is much broader. The coming of the wise men, from their various corners of the world indicated that the gospel had come for all people on earth, not just for the nation Israel. This took a long time to sink in, but it eventually did and the mission expanded and became inclusive. People began to understand that an itinerant Jewish rabbi was so inclusive in his message that he made all who chose to follow him “sharers in the promise” of eternal life.

This is often something some of our brothers and sisters in Christ seem to forget. Jesus sought to include people in his vision and mission, not to exclude them based on some litmus test that determined whether they were thinking right or not about who he was or the message he tried to bring about God’s love, forgiveness and grace. The good news was for all comers not just for a select few. It still is.

Those of us who have a broad perspective of our faith know and understand this—there is room for all of us under God’s umbrella. The challenge we face is allowing one another to have his or her faith journey and honoring it while we move along on our own.

Years ago, a very distraught man came to talk to me about his son who had joined what he considered a “cult” in California. His son told his dad that he was no longer his father, the leader of the group was. This leader had come from God to show his followers the true and only way to the kingdom. This had cut his father to the quick. He was a man who was and is very religious and on a spiritual path that his son was busy rejecting. His father was accused of having a “lukewarm faith.”

As many of us would, his father went to visit his son to see if he could pry him away from the group that had taken over his life and control of his bank account. This didn’t work and the father returned home dejected. This is when I saw him, at the bottom of his misery, wondering if his faith of a lifetime was wrong. After some discussion, I recommended that he not enter into dialogue that turned into an argument with his child or with the leader of the group. I suggested that he tell his son that he was grateful he had found a spiritual path for himself and that he certainly allowed him that right and that space. His only request was that his son honor him in the same way and honor the path that had served him for many years. As time went by, the son left the group, and while still a lot more conservative in his beliefs than his dad, is functioning in the world once again.

A long before I had my conversations with this man about his son, a few years into my ministry at St. Jacobi in Wisconsin, I had a visitor who appeared at my home one summer night. My children were playing in the yard and my then husband was on a business trip when a rather wild looking fellow appeared. It was 6 in the evening.

I remember it well. He had found my name and address in the National Association's Yearbook and had come to tell me how absolutely wrong it was that women were pastors. It took him quite a while to get to that point. My children had gone to bed and he rambled on and on. Remembering that I might be "entertaining angels unawares," and that I believe everyone has his or her own pathway to God, I patiently listened. I finally asked just what his point was and he then told me he thought I was a modern day "Jezebel." You must give me points for not laughing aloud. All I could think of was being nibbled to death by a bunch of dogs as she was. It was at this moment that he became somewhat threatening. I must admit I was afraid for my children and myself. But my brain remained in gear as I finally put my "Christian hospitality" on hold and told him that if he did not leave I was going to call the police. I took him by the arm, escorted him to his "Jesus van" covered with various scripture readings and stickers, and wished him Godspeed. He was surprised. And, of course, he asked if I could consider myself "a Christian" after treating him so shabbily. I told him to fish the log out of his own eye before he looked for the mote in mine. He drove off at 11 o'clock.

I am not sure what he had hoped to accomplish, I think he had hoped to scare me or bring me to some great revelation. However, this encounter convinced me even more that I had been called by God to spread the good news of God's inclusive nature. Every time I have been assaulted by folks of his ilk, I have been reassured of this fact. Believe me, there have been more than enough of these events but none as threatening as the first.

The wise men came to the child, saw the child and returned to their homes knowing they had an "epiphany," an encounter with God. The story of the child who would become Messiah to some would be spread abroad and has continued to spread thanks to all who are faithful.

We are all "sharers in the promise"—the promise of lives more fulfilled when we choose to live by the teachings of Christ, when we learn that we are on an equal footing with others and that they have their own special pathway to God. Their way cannot be our way but that makes it no less a journey of epiphany. This New Year it would be best for all of us to discover the ways in which we can share the "good news" of the message of Jesus without noting the many ways in which we think others fall short. After all, we are all on this journey together.

--Amen