

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 7, 2018
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson
“Epiphany: God has no favorites”

St Peter said: “I have come to understand that God has no favorites; but that the person in any nation who does what is right is acceptable to him.” A theology student was in class at a feminist seminary. The student asked the principal of the seminary, who was a woman, “What would have happened if it had been three Wise Women instead of three Wise Men? “The principal paused for a moment, smiled and then said: “First: They would have asked directions, Second: they would have arrived on time, and thirdly: they would have helped deliver the baby!”

Canada is an immigrant nation where peoples from all across the globe have come together. Diversity is now a fact of life in many of our cities. Gone are the days when everybody celebrated Christmas and Easter together. On our doorstep are folks who are Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, spiritualists, agnostics, atheists, fundamentalists, Catholics, and all the protestant denominations including Presbyterians. Do Presbyterians have a corner on the truth? If you are not a Catholic are you destined for hell? Has God been active with other peoples from the dawn of time or did God begin only about 6,000 years ago with the Jews? If you don't believe in Jesus are you headed to be lost eternally as some Christians teach? Did the Christian religion anticipate diversity? Was the original early teaching exclusive of non-Christians or was it open to all peoples at the beginning?

I well remember studying theology under Dr. Stanley Glen who was principle of Knox College. One day a student asked the question “Are the people in the world who have never heard about Jesus going to hell? Are they lost eternally?” Dr. Glen told a story about a 19th century missionary in a remote section of China who was preaching to a crowd of people who knew nothing about Christianity whatsoever because they were cut off from the rest of the world. As he spoke about Jesus there was one woman at the back of the crowd whose face literally glowed. After wards she came forward to greet the missionary and told him this: “I have known Jesus all my life. I just didn't know his name.”

Epiphany is a very interesting celebration in the church year because it celebrates that at the beginning of the Christian tradition, that foreign Magi showed up at Christ's time of birth. We cannot know whether this story is true or not. But we do know that Magi paid homage to Nero at Naples in AD 66 and that they returned home by another route. So, magi did travel to visit great leaders. They thought that stars could be the angelic counterpart of a great man so they paid attention to the heavens... Scholars and scientists have studied the sky for that time period between 2 B.C. and 12 B.C. looking for candidate stars for the star of Bethlehem. Haley's comet shows up in October 8th 12 B.C. and makes a pass across the sun. Jupiter and Saturn were in close conjunction three times in 7 B.C. which to the naked eye doubles the brightness and appears as a single star.

However, let's leave it for a moment as to whether the story is true or not and ask: "Why was it included in the New Testament writings?" Religions are often tribal in nature and usually inclusive of only the tribe or nation. But we have this story in the New Testament written up by a Jewish man. It is unique in the New Testament and has no parallel in the early writings of the church, for these were pagan men adoring the Christ child- actually paying him homage. In the Magi tradition of astrology great leaders were both human and divine. Each great person had his own star. But why would St. Matthew put this strange little story in the New Testament? It was a very non-tribal thing to do! *Was Christianity somehow then not tribal?* What stands out for me is something often deemphasized by some teachers of the Bible, but which is nevertheless there: that the Deity in order to be the Creator of all of us would have been active with all peoples of the world from the dawn of creation until now, on every continent, in every tribe and in every nation. If we argue only for a tribal God, meaning our tribe, our way or the highway kind of God, believe only what we teach kind of God and the rest of the religions are wrong and people who believe them are lost... we would have a lesser God than the Great One who made everything.

Does it really make sense as our Victorian ancestors believed and some fundamentalists still do today that people who didn't know Christ were lost and without God? What about other nations around before Judaism? Were they too without knowledge of God? What about the aboriginal Bushmen of Africa who were the oldest inhabitants of Africa? They were around possibly as long as 8-25 million years ago depending upon who you listen to. Do we really believe that the Great one didn't care about the Bushmen? Did the Bushmen have no revelation or knowledge of God? Were they created and then ignored? Epiphany is in the New Testament to remind us of some Biblical teaching that we cannot just gloss over: **That God is active with other nations and peoples.**

Solomon got this right when he built the Jewish Temple "as a house of prayer for all the nations". He actually built into the Temple a place for gentiles to pray in their own courtyard. Solomon's temple was not just for Jews only. It was not tribal exclusive. He wanted the stranger, the non-Jew, to be able to pray in the temple he was building. Like the wise men, Solomon was also very wise. He got it that any God worth the name had to have created everyone, had to love everyone... that all moved and had their being within God. The only instance we have in the New Testament of the anger of Jesus takes place when he finds that the Court for these Gentile believers in God, had been taken over to sell materials and animals and birds for sacrifice. His anger is recorded in St. Matthew when he quotes Solomon's vision of the temple as "a house of prayer for **all the nations.**" Jesus is upset that there is no place for gentiles to worship the one true God in the great Jewish temple, and that instead 'rip off' artists have taken over that sacred space for buying and selling when gentiles could have been praying there.

When St Peter first started to preach, he talked about 'God having no favorites but that the person in any nation who did what is right is acceptable to God.' After a sheet was let down before him in a vision that allowed him to go beyond kosher food he was ready for the centurion Cornelius who was seeking God. Before St. Peter had the vision that he could go

beyond Judaism and still be good with God, he would have turned Cornelius away. St. Paul taught the same thing that God has no favorites. Listen to St. Paul: “For instance pagans, who have never heard of the law but are led by reason to do what the law commands, may not actually possess the law but they can be **said to be the law**. They can point to the substance of the law engraved on their hearts- they can call a witness that is their own conscience- they have accusation and defense, that is their own inner mental dialogue... on the day when, according to the good news I preach, God, through Jesus Christ, judges the secrets of mankind.”

On Mar’s Hill in Athens St. Paul made this amazing statement: “The God whom I proclaim is in fact the one you already worship without knowing it...God gives life and breath to **everyone**. From one single stock he not only created the whole human race so that they could occupy the entire earth, but he decreed how long each nation should flourish and what the boundaries of its territory should be. And he did this so that all nations might seek the deity, and by feeling their way towards him, succeed in finding him. Yet in fact he is not far from any of us, since it is in Him that we live and move and have our being, as some of your own writers have said.” But if we read the Older Testament carefully we will catch once again this all-inclusive truth that God works with other nations and peoples. Isaiah mentions Cyrus as being appointed by God to play a fundamental role in the return of the Jewish exiles. Implication? God is active with another nation and its ruler and does not limit Divine actions just to Jews.

Listen to the inclusiveness of Isaiah talking about the star of Bethlehem:
“Arise shine, for your light has come, the glory of Yahweh is rising on you though night still covers the earth **and darkness the peoples**. Above you now Yahweh now rises and above you his glory appears. **The nations come to your light and Kings to your dawning brightness**.

This is the message of Epiphany and it could, if we would get out of the way of it, lead us towards a Faith that took in the whole world. Christianity like any other religion has the temptation to become tribal and exclusive. But that view ignores the seeds that were sown in the first Epiphany when the three wise foreigners were on bended knee before the Christ child. To develop a worldwide faith that is fully inclusive of all peoples who the Creator has made means the end of exclusive tribalism. It will be to seek once again the One God “in whom we all live and move and have our being.” What comforts me is this: Truth in any nation or truth in any religion is one, as are the virtues of mercy, hope, faith, forgiveness, compassion, and kindness. I also think That the original vision found in our Scriptures was as wide as the world and all the peoples who live in it. We just need to rediscover it! Epiphany teaches us what the word Emmanuel actually means to human beings: **God is with us**. To understand Epiphany is to recognize the actions of God with all peoples, in all times and places in every tribe and nation. As the psalmist says: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof and all who dwell therein.” That is so very exciting and such a contrast to our history so far! But it was always there.

If we do understand this we will discover a common core in thought about God and that common core will be to understand that God is love and that although life is fragile, LOVE IS NOT! Love, will take care of us both in this life, this coming year and in the life to come, for God is love. Remember the message of the Christmas angels? “Peace on earth good will towards human beings”? A message of peace of necessity must include us all in our diversity recognizing that we are One under God.

In Knox Stratford I had an interesting young 9 year old boy. He was a curious boy and read widely. One night he had a dream that he went to heaven. He told his mother about the dream and said to her: “It was very real mother”. “What did you do in Heaven?” she said. He said “I met the Buddha”. Surprised that her son would even know about the Buddha she asked him what they talked about. “He asked me what my name was, and I said ‘Tristan’.” “Ah yes, Tristan” said the Buddha, “**Jesus has told me all about you!**”

I think Tristan, without even knowing it, understood the true meaning of Epiphany. Of course, in the next reality Jesus and the Buddha have to be friends! They were on the same quest to know God and the Christian scripture says: God is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. God can reward us in the life now or the Life to come, for God operates in both realities. Isaiah the Jewish prophet is very bold and puts these words in the mouth of God: “I was found by those who did not seek Me; I was made manifest to those who did not ask for Me.”

What is the obvious oh so liberating conclusion?

That a God of love has been active with all peoples for all time.

The message of Epiphany is that this God can be known by every person no exceptions

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye

shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you:

8 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh

findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

That is why Zoroastrians were following a star to Bethlehem. They were seeking and they found who they were looking for. So can we! So can ANYONE!

That is why we have a message worth proclaiming in the diversity of Canada. May the God of all peoples, bless us all, this Epiphany! Amen!