

The Gentiles' Christmas

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The season of Epiphany begins with the celebration of the arrival of the Magi. These eastern sages showed a lot of determination in traveling a great distance to present their worship and their costly gifts to the Christ-child; but we know very little about them. They show up unexpectedly, do their thing, and disappear again all within a few short verses of Scripture, leaving us with a lot of questions. For example, we don't know where they came from; though we can make a pretty good guess of Babylon or Persia. We don't know when they came; the best we can do is to narrow it down to a window of two years or so. It's a safe bet, however, that they were not present the night of Jesus' birth when he was placed in the manger. By the time they showed up, Mary and Joseph would have had more permanent lodgings. We also don't know how many Magi there were. The traditional number comes from the three gifts they brought; but for all we know there may have been two or twenty of them. Some early church fathers guessed twelve, which would have had symbolic significance; but again, we just don't know.

And even what we do know leaves us with something of an ironic mystery. I mean, in Judea, scholars and scribes, priests and Levites, nobles and common people – they've all been waiting for the coming of the Savior. They've been longing for it with eager anticipation, watching for it. They've been studying God's Word intently, pouring over prophecies, engaged in all kinds of speculation and date setting, trying to read the signs of the times to determine exactly when the Lord would send the long promised Messiah to Israel. But none of them comes even close to figuring it out. And then, suddenly, along come these mysterious Gentile strangers, who, to the best of our knowledge, have had very little exposure to God's Word, and they're asking, "So, where's this new king of yours we've heard about?" Those with virtually none of God's special revelation handed down through Moses and the prophets seem to know a whole lot more about what God is doing in the world than those who have been studying God's Word and work all their lives. Gentiles from a distance can see clearly what God's own people miss even though it's taking place right under their noses.

As strange as that may seem to us, it's not something that's strange to the Scriptures. Quite the contrary, it's a consistent biblical theme that those who stand closest to the revealed Word of God are often the ones who understand it the least. Consider the earthly ministry of Jesus. He sets out to systematically fulfill all the remarkable prophecies that concern the Messiah, doing everything exactly as the prophets foretold. Yet who was it that opposed him most? It was the priests, scribes, and Pharisees – the very people who knew the prophecies the best. And who is it that recognizes Jesus is the Messiah? It's the common people; and in particular, it's the sinners and outcasts who receive him most willingly – the very people you would expect to be the most ignorant of Holy Scripture.

We see the same thing happening after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. On the day of Pentecost some three thousand Jews in Jerusalem came to faith in Christ, which is a fairly impressive number; but remember, that's out of a population of a quarter million or so, so about a tenth of a percent. And many of those were visitors to the city. They'd only come for the feast; they didn't stay. And while it's true that the Christian church in Jerusalem continued to grow at a steady rate, it was never more than a tiny fragment of the total population there. Where the Christian Church first experienced a real explosion in numbers was at Syrian Antioch, which was a predominately Gentile city. It's from Antioch that the saving Gospel of Jesus spread across Asia Minor to Ionia, and then into Greece, Italy, and beyond – and again, almost

all of the converts were Gentiles – people who, for the most part, didn't know the Holy Scriptures and had never heard of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or the prophets. Meanwhile, the people who had God's Word and had been looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises, largely reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ when they finally hear it.

It all unfolds exactly as Jesus foretold in the parable of the wedding banquet. That's the one in which he describes a king who had planned an elaborate, weeklong marriage feast for his son. When the happy day arrives, the king sends his servants to notify all those who had been honored in advance with a special invitation: "Come to the feast, for all is prepared." But they all make excuses and refuse to come. So the king sends his servants out into the streets and byways – to those who had not been invited at first. "Bring in everyone you can find – bring the poor, the lame, the blind – fill my banquet hall with guests."

And this is the inverted situation that exists as you come to the close of the first couple of centuries of Christian history. The Jews (most of them, anyway), the people who had been honored with the invitation through the Law and the Prophets, refused to come to God's great feast of salvation. Meanwhile the Church was filled with those who had been considered outcasts: the Gentiles – those who had been spiritually blind and far away from God and the light of his truth. And it happened that those early Gentile Christians understood how blessed they were to have been called out of darkness and their pagan idolatry. That's why, back in those formative centuries when the church calendar we know was being solidified, that the Epiphany was made an annual celebration a good many years before Christmas was. In fact, there are many Christians even today who don't celebrate Christmas until January 6th. It makes sense: the message of Epiphany was more important to them – not just that the Savior was born; what they latched onto and held dear was that the One born King of the Jews was their Savior and King too. And ever since Christmas was placed on the calendar, Epiphany has been known as "the Gentiles' Christmas".

Since we are Gentiles (at least I don't think any of us are physical descendants of Abraham), it means today, Epiphany, is our Christmas. And therefore it's right that we properly appreciate the message of Epiphany. We need to remember that we aren't the original heirs of the promise God made to Abraham and his descendants forever. Instead, the Scriptures describe us as being *adopted* into the household of faith. They speak of us as wild branches being grafted into the cultivated tree of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. We're here through God's grace alone, and doubly so because we are Gentiles. And that should make us even more grateful for the grace God has given us.

Unfortunately, we don't often think in these terms. Instead, most of us, because we've had faith in the Gospel since infancy and don't remember it being any other way, and perhaps because we've come from families that have been part of the Church for many generations, we really don't have the sense of how blessed we are to be believers in Christ. In many ways, we are very much like those first century Jews who always had all the spiritual advantages and thus took them for granted. We've lost that sense possessed by the first Gentile converts who were overwhelmed with joy at discovering that they too were being welcomed by the Lord on equal footing with his chosen people Israel. And there's a danger in that.

As good as it is, there's a problem with having advantage and privilege. The Jews were God's chosen people. Why did he choose them? For no reason other than his super-abounding grace and love. It had absolutely nothing to do with any wonderful qualities or inherent moral superiority the people possessed. If anything, Scripture indicates the opposite: that in order to emphasize that salvation is always God's work granted to those who do not

deserve it, he chose a people who were particularly obstinate, rebellious, and weak. But that's not how the Jews came to think of it.

It's a flaw of the fallen nature of man that causes him to always want to take credit for what goes well for him. He wants to believe he deserves good things from God's hand. And you parents know how quickly the special privileges that you grant your children are transformed in their minds to rights that they are entitled to. It doesn't change when we get older. And so the Jews came to think of themselves as better than the other nations. "The Lord chose us because we're the best. We deserve everything he gave us. And those others? They obviously lack any redeeming qualities. That's why they were not chosen." So the Jews took to calling them dogs because of their filthy ways, or calling them stones because they were spiritually no more capable than rocks.

This is the main reason first century Jews had so much trouble with Jesus and his Gospel. Good people chosen by God and who deserve his favor don't need a Savior from sin to die in their place. But faith in Jesus means recognizing first that you need a savior, that you have no redeeming qualities, and that's why you need to be redeemed. It means accepting that you are no better than a Gentile. And most of the Jews refused to admit that. They didn't want to let go of their pride and special status. And this is why even though they long had the privilege of possessing the Holy Scriptures, they couldn't understand what they were all about; namely, Jesus and salvation through faith in him.

And we who now enjoy all God's privileges and blessing are susceptible to the same sort of dangerous thinking. We tend to think of ourselves as better than others. And with this in mind, let me ask, who are your Gentiles? Whom do you look down upon? Whom do you think not worthy of being a member of this church?

There are many congregations in our synod that are situated in places where the surrounding communities have undergone a great deal of change since their founding. Whereas they were once composed largely of white, middle to upper class families, they've become far more diverse: lots of immigrants, with darker skin, and different cultures, who don't speak English so well, and who maybe don't make as much money. What to do? I'm happy to report that some reach out into their communities. They see the evangelistic opportunities – that rather than send a missionary to Africa or South America, Africa and South America are right next door. They open their hearts and their minds. They see the people sitting in darkness all around them. And they open the doors of their churches to them, welcoming them into the family of God.

But many other congregations in the same situation don't. They circle the wagons and adopt a siege mentality. "We can't let any of those people join our church. There's too many of them. Why, we might become a minority in our own church." Funny, I thought the church belonged to the Lord who bought it with his own blood. I know of one congregation where the surrounding community has become mostly Hispanic. The vast majority of these newcomers are what's known as "CINO": Catholic in name only. For many such people the Lutheran Church is an easy transition because it combines the forms of worship with which they're familiar with the fullness of the Gospel of Christ. This church has before it not just an open window for evangelism; it's more like a six lane freeway. You could fly a jumbo jet through it. But do you think the members of the church are willing to do it? Not on your life. They'd rather die as a congregation than share it with any of *those* people. I'm afraid they might get their wish.

Rather than point fingers, we have to ask: are we any different? I often wonder what would happen, say, if a Hispanic family seeking a church home stopped by for worship here one

fine Sunday morning. How welcomed would they feel? Looking around at all of us, you know that they'd already feel pretty "out of place". What would you do personally to help lift that burden, if anything at all? And would it make a difference if they were a young family with lots of kids – who maybe had relatives or friends in the area – other sizable young families that might also join our fellowship if they managed to "break the ice", so to speak? Would you be rejoicing in this work of the Lord to grow his church and bring souls to salvation? Or would you be ruefully calculating the cost of educating all those strange brown children at the Lutheran school and secretly hoping that they'd find a different fellowship to worship with? Or let's do this: suppose they didn't come visiting the church. Suppose they only moved in next door. Would it occur to you to invite them to join us?

Again I ask, who are your Gentiles? Who is it that because of their differences, their economic status, their troubled past, or *whatever* cause – who is it you deem somehow unworthy of being part of the body of Christ that worships here? Can you put faces on them? Do you, perhaps, even know their names?

Saul of Tarsus was a self-described Pharisee's Pharisee. As far as the Jews went, he was the best of the best and the proudest of the proud. He was also a great Bible scholar. And he knew why God had chosen to bless him: because he was such a good and holy person, better than his peers and far, far better than any Gentile dog or stone. That's why he hated the Gospel of Jesus Christ so much, and that's why he set out to destroy it. And you remember what happened: how the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a brilliant light, knocking him off his proud perch atop a horse and laying him flat on his face in the dust. The Lord also left him blind, so that his physical condition would match his true understanding of the Scriptures he supposedly knew so well. And then, the ultimate irony, having humbled Saul so low, or as we know him better, St. Paul, the Lord Jesus raised him up and appointed him to be his chosen apostle to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles.

In today's Epistle, Paul writes of this as his greatest honor. He calls himself the very least of God's people, not worthy of anything good from the hand of God. What a change, huh? And he counts it as God's great gift to him that he was given the privilege of declaring to those who were far away from the light of God the unsearchable riches of Christ. It's my Epiphany prayer for all of us that we too may be humbled by the mighty hand of God, and stripped of all our dearly cherished pride and imagined worthiness, that we too may discover again for ourselves the unsearchable riches in Christ that have been freely given to us. And then, like Paul, we will count it our greatest joy to share the gift of grace we've been given. It's Christmas for the Gentiles. Let's tell them about it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!