



January 2020 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Beloved of God –

Christmas has come and gone for another year. The music that filled our ears for weeks on end is now hushed. For many the decorations have been stored away for another year.

As the story of the nativity with its shepherds, and the couple and the newborn baby was unfolding, another story was developing. The Magi came from the east and began to ask questions around town: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We have followed his rising star and we have come to give him honor.”

King Herod, shaken up by it all, works at getting the Magi to help him locate the child. Indeed, the strange foreigners find the child and are so overwhelmed by what they find that they fall upon their knees in worship and praise and adoration. Like the shepherds on the hillside, they begin to realize that something is changing in their world, that a new thing is happening, that a new world is being born.

It is a wonderful story, full of emotion and intrigue. It provides the inspiration for art and music, for poetry and song. Few stories told through the centuries are so familiar, so beloved, so rich with pathos and delight.

This gospel according to Matthew is telling the story of the birth of Jesus for new Christians, for new followers of the Way. And even in so young a church it seems that their vision was limited. The boundaries of their community were already closing tightly around them. The gospel writer could see already that the new believing community was too easily settling into the idea that this new life in Christ was for them; they were already getting too comfortable with themselves and too easily willing to put others outside.

Matthew shocks his readers right from the first verse of this gospel by recounting the genealogy of Jesus. He does so in a way that must have confounded those who first read it. A genealogy in those days was traced through the male lineage, but Matthews breaks from tradition and includes four women in his list of the ancestors of Jesus. And they were not just any four women. They were women whose lives bore the scars of prostitution and incest, of adultery and murder. Matthew is laying the groundwork, even in his seemingly boring list of names of folks long dead, that the new day that is dawning is quite different from anything one might be expecting.

And this gospel writer keeps up the theme when he introduces the Magi. We often call them wise men. Some have suggested they were philosophers; others have called them astrologers because of their fascination with the stars. But whoever they were and wherever they were

from, Matthew's point is that they are not from here; these are not hometown folk, with hometown values, and hometown upbringing. These were odd folk from some foreign land. Not our kind.

The gospel writer unfolds the rest of the story of Jesus by reminding his readers – and he continues to remind us – that the saving word of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus, is not for some, but for all. Not for men only, but also for women. Not for the apparently perfect only, but for those whose lives bear the scars of unmentionable human pain. Not for the hometown crowd only, but for those on the other side of the tracks. Not for those who believe exactly as we do, but also for those who are struggling to believe anything at all, or those who have lost their faith.

The star comes and rests over the place where the infant Jesus is born. Keep your eyes on it. Gaze at the star. Focus on it. Fix it firmly in your mind. Because in time you will discover that the points of the star will stretch themselves into the form of a cross, and it will no longer rest over the place where the child lay, but will come to rest over your life and the world you inhabit.

Some years ago, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York plastered the city with posters of the altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral lavishly decorated for Christmas. It was a warm and inviting sight. The poster's caption was simple: "Come home."

This Epiphany, "come home." That is the invitation implicit throughout the season. No matter where you've been or what you've been up to, or how long you may have been away, "come home."

This home is for everyone. For wise folk from the east who seek out the child, and the home for the Christ Child in every heart that will have it so.

In Christ Jesus –
Shalom,
+Bishop Larry Kochendorfer

"The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:13)