

Faith Mennonite Church
January 6, 2013 ~ Epiphany
Joetta Schlabach

Light and hope for a new year
Psalm 72:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12

Each year as Christmas approaches we hear the familiar chant “Put Christ back into Christmas.” This year, following the tragedy at Sandy Hook elementary school, a similar chant began: “Put God back into our schools.” Both of these chants speak a desire for stability and control in changing times. They speak out of nostalgia for a past that will likely not return. Unfortunately they also are coupled, far too often, with assumptions that run counter to the Christmas story, to the Judeo-Christian God story. Those who chant “Put Christ back into Christmas” tend to be more alarmed by religious pluralism than by the consumerism of the holiday. And many who call for “putting God back into our schools,” would do so with armed security systems.

We so long for the manger scene on the public square. For the “all is calm and all is bright” of shepherds and magi gathered around a manger on a starry night with the holy family, halos hovering above their heads. But that is a picture of religious art more than an accurate rendering of the biblical story.

Now don't get me wrong: we are part of a long tradition that does long for the “all is calm and all is bright.” That is the *shalom* vision of “everyone beneath their vine and fig tree, living in peace and unafraid” (Micah 4:4). Yes, this is our deep desire. And we believe it is God's deep desire. Somehow, someway, in the great movement of the cosmos, God's will will be done.

But it doesn't happen with chants and slogans. God's coming always seems to bring as much conflict as it brings peace. For God comes into the midst of our brokenness, into the darkest places of the world. And God comes in new ways, not putting the old pieces back into the familiar places of a puzzle but splashing fresh paint on the old canopy, helping us see new images, new vistas.

And that is what happens in the story of the magi. The story is riddled with the tension of the best drama. Foreigners, an impressive entourage of learned folk come knocking at the door of paranoid King Herod. Tradition says this was a group of three, based only the fact of the three gifts that they give. But given their long trek, they were likely a group of a dozen or more—a few wise astrologers and their sag team of cooks and camel drivers. King Herod already had a son, an heir to his throne, so when these foreigners spoke of a new recently born king of the Jews, one who has his own star, the king trembles. And the tension only increases when the king realizes that he needs to consult with the religious leaders—the priests and scribes—to find the answer to the question that the foreigners have brought. There was no love lost between King Herod, the king of the Jews, and the Jewish populace. King Herod walked a fine line, maintaining his power and appeasing the Roman occupiers. He was not interested in the deepest desires for shalom of the people of his kingdom. He did not regularly turn to the priests and scribes for direction. But true to the form of the stories of kings in the Old Testament, those with royal power, are not those who directly receive the Word of God. When their backs are against a wall, they turn to the prophets, the powerless ones on the margin who speak for God.

And like too many of the kings of old, Herod tries to manipulate that Word, sending the magi off to find the new royal baby and then report back to him. They go, they worship and adore, but they don't return to Herod. And the story doesn't end happily ever after. Herod rages and as the magi return by a different rode, Joseph snaps up Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt, for Herod is about to pull off his own Sandy Hook mayhem.

There is violence, there are tears and weeping. The prophesy of the old man Simeon, in Luke's version of the Christmas story comes to pass. In Luke 2, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple for his dedication and there they hear this wonderful prophesy of an old, godly man:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (29-35).

Friends, the Christmas story affirms that God is not absent when violence occurs. God walks with us through the darkest of valleys. When we follow this God we are not assured that we will always be entirely safe, entirely unscathed. But we are assured that we are never alone. And we are assured that God brings moments of recognition, epiphanies of encouragement, that keep us walking along the winding path toward justice and true freedom.

Think again of the wonderful rhythm of epiphanies in the Christmas story. Frightened, unwed and pregnant Mary is taken in by kind Joseph and affirmed by her elderly cousin Elizabeth. Forced by a census to travel on foot when her pregnancy is full term, Mary and Joseph are attended by shepherds who show up with news of angel songs that sent them to worship this God baby in a manger. The blessings and prophecies of old Simeon and Anna in the temple, followed by the visit of foreigners following a star, carries them through the trauma of their flight to Egypt, their time as refugees, and the unpredictable life of their son whose coronation was on a cross.

This is a story that will never settle for putting Christ back into Christmas if that means ensuring a manger scene on the town square but not shelter for the homeless. This is a story that will never settle for putting God back in our schools while ignoring educational and school-funding disparities and the need for robust mental health care, or ignoring the idolatrous culture that worships and puts its trust in guns.

But this is a story of hope and of light coming from unexpected places. Shepherds...the temp workers and day laborers hear the angels' song. Magi...the foreigners of another faith follow the star to the Holy One. Old folks with time to spare notice the sacred in the ordinary. And Mary and Joseph, not so different from Sandy and Dick, Shelly and Matthew, Arlene and Glenn, Barb and Joan and all of our families, all of us, single and partnered, who say "yes, may it be to us as Holy One wills." We continue this story. In our desires and longings to overcome destructive patterns in our lives, to build trust in our neighborhoods, to offer compassion in our relationships, to seek hope in the face of uncertainty, to work to decrease gun violence, to be patient and understanding when grief overwhelms, to walk in solidarity with those who sit in darkness and face their end, to believe always that love is stronger than fear and that light will always shine in the darkness, in all of these ways we reflect the light of Christ. Every day is an epiphany.

On Friday as I was about to leave the office to attend the memorial service for Dan Leisen's father, the phone rang. When I answered, Terry Gerber greeted me and asked if she could send me that day's entry in her prayer diary. "I'm sitting here in the sunshine and feeling so much gratitude," she said. Later in the evening as I returned to my email before going to bed, I found these words, this epiphany that defies the years that Terry has lived with the constraints of a body she has little control over:

Oh, God, how wonderful is the light streaming into the house today.

Reminds me that You are the light of the world.

Jesus, I praise You, the light. You light our way.

Wonderful, Counselor, Christ child, forever and always our Savior.

I am so full of praise for You, to You, about You, today!

My heart is full. Glory to You, oh God!

As we gather at the table this morning, may we come to be strengthened in hope, affirming once again that our very life springs from the death of Jesus, whom death could not bind. As we receive the broken bread and drink the crushed grapes, may we trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God.