

“We three kings” represents all people

Epiphany 1C—January 6, 2019

[This transcript was meant for a spoken performance. It is not optimized for a reading experience.]

Westward leading, still proceeding.

Today, we celebrate the last day of Christmas. Notice that the Christmas tree and all the tinsel and bobbles are packed away for another year.

Growing up in small-city Ontario, we and all the neighbours had fresh-cut, real trees at Christmas. Oh, everyone had a different tree. There were short-needled ones and long-needle ones.

No sooner did the tree go up and get decorated than it was stripped naked and tossed out the back door. Everyone’s house had a cut naked tree outside their house.

On Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, one by one, trees were tossed out into the snow. Used and discarded.

By the end of the week, just before New Year’s, the city would go street by street and gather the thrown-out trees. Those trees would go to a place and be piled—one on top of another on top of another—until there was a mountain of naked, discarded Christmas trees.

With one flame, the trees went *whooshhh* as they incinerated and turned to ashes.

When you had real trees, one was always careful about the dangers of the trees catching fire while it was still up in your house. Sometimes, the lights we put on the trees got so hot it felt like you could roast a marshmallow over them.

It didn’t matter how much water you fed your festive tree—it quickly dried out and the needles began to fall.

Keeping your tree up until New Year’s was always a pain because, as you dragged it to give it the heave-ho out the back door, the pine needles escaped and were scattered all over the floor. It was not that unusual to find pine needles in the carpet in July.

But let me go back to Boxing Day. There was always snow growing up. Lots of snow. As kids, we would bring out our brand new toboggans and sleds... oh, and the flying saucers.

Being kids, we were creative. One by one, we would find the tossed trees and drag them all... all of them... to whoever house we were playing at.

Suddenly, one tree became 20 trees. The trees weren’t too dry at that point, so we could build great green forts. Let me give you a tip: if you want to build a fort with Christmas trees, make sure you grab all the scotch pines. Their needles didn’t dry and drop as quickly as those little pine needles.

Slowly, very slowly, people (well, some people) abandoned the fresh-cut trees. Our supply of trees for our forts began to dwindle.

Artificial trees began to be the festive favourite.

First, there was the exact opposite of a holiday green tree: the infamous silver tree, the aluminum tree. Those silver trees were something to behold. They didn't look—well, they didn't look like a tree. They were silver-like tinsel—oh, and very flammable.

One could not put tree lights on the tree because the tree would melt. How many of you remember the spotlight you had to shine on the silver trees? It had a four-colour disk that spun around making your tree yellow, then red, then green, then blue.

These new trees seemed like trees from outer space. That was precisely the intent of the design.

If you know anything about design, you will remember the atomic era. That tree was intended to remind you (you being North American) of the atomic age of space travel, rockets and all things shiny and modern.

For those closer to my age, think of the mirrors and clocks that we hung on our walls. They were shiny and starburst-looking.

The tree—the designs—were not meant for you to think you had a real Christmas tree in the living room. They were meant to represent a message of modern technology.

They were symbols of power in a nuclear age.

Today's reading is also about symbols, today being Epiphany. Today, the reading from Matthew speaks about the manifestation of the Christ to the gentiles as represented by the Magi.

By now, most of you are used to me pointing out the difference between biographical story and theological story.

Let me cut right to it. There were no three kings. The storyteller Matthew never said that there were three kings. Let's just say that there were no kings, no magic ones, no Magi, no queens bringing gifts to a newborn child.

There is no historical record of Herod killing babies, killing innocents. If something didn't happen, we say that it was not true.

If something is not true, do we toss that something out the back door?

Or you could ask yourself, why is this story of Epiphany in the bible? You could say that for almost every tale in the bible: why is this here? What does this have to do with me? What does this have to do with my community? Those are questions that are good to ask.

Matthew's gospel is the only gospel with today's story in it.

Ask yourself, why?

Where is Matthew's community? Where is the church? It is not in Jerusalem. It is not even in Israel, but in the area that we call Syria today. Late first-century Syria.

Who is Matthew's target audience? It is gentiles, the non-Jewish people.

The Christian Church in all of its configurations has over and over again confused symbol and reality. They have confused symbolic and literal.

There were no literal strangers from wherever bringing whatever. There was no barn, there was no cave.

Do not mistake what I am saying. I am not wrecking your faith; I am inviting you to go deeper, to be free and dive deep.

Epiphany is the manifestations of Christ to the non-Jewish people.

That is what I think the gospel writer is trying to communicate.

Matthew is telling his or her community that this one called the Christ is not just the Messiah for the Jewish people. Jesus comes to all people.

"We three kings" represents all people. Have you ever wondered how come, in almost every set of three kings, there is an older guy with a beard, a younger guy and one guy of colour? They are depicted with camels, donkeys and even elephants.

"We three kings" is about including diversity. Including those whom you might consider outsiders. Including those who might be different. Jesus comes to all people.

That is what the symbol speaks to. Interesting that I talked about the emergence of ugly, spindly, silver fake trees that were meant to remind us of power, atomic power. Take that further: military power. They were made of aluminum.

Our Christmas stories seem to be the exact opposite. Placing the birth story in the muck and stench of a barn is the opposite of shiny sleek, clean, destructive power.

Stay with me for a bit more.

Being a Christian is not about the stories we tell over and over again for a whiff of nostalgia. Being a Christian means that you are a person of the way, a way of being.

Richard Rohr, one of my favourite contemporary Catholic theologians, says this about Christianity:

Christianity is a lifestyle—A way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving.

Let me say that again.

Christianity, our faith, is a lifestyle.

Christianity is a way of being.

Christianity is simple.

Christianity is non-violent.

Christianity is shared.

Christianity is loving.

That is our faith. Richard goes on to say:

However, we have made it into an established 'religion' and all that goes with that and avoided the lifestyle change itself.

One could be warlike.
One could be greedy.
One could be racist.
One could be selfish.
One could be vain.

This is our history and yet, many still believe that Jesus is one's "personal Lord and Saviour".

Richard warns:

The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on Earth is too great.

As you begin to put the tinsel and bobbles and trees away for another year, remember the reason for the season.

*Oh, star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide with thy perfect light.*

Because this is good news indeed.