

Date: 1 January 2011 ~ Epiphany Sunday  
Text: Matthew 2:1-12  
Site: St. Luke's United Church ~ Upper Tantallon, N.S.  
Preacher: Kevin Little

This being the Sunday closest to 6 January we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. In our tradition the focus is on the Magi, the Astrologers, the Three Kings, whatever you call them, who arrive at the home of Mary and Joseph (no stable in the Matthew text) to present the Jesus child (not an infant in Matthew's text) with gifts.

The liturgy used on this Sunday, around the world, would draw the contrast between the light and darkness, making it clear that Jesus is the light of the world. In readings from both testaments, hymns, prayers and litanies, this contrast would be the focal point of the service.

In our Christian year we have moved from Advent to Christmas to Epiphany. To refresh the memories of those who already know, and to inform those who don't, the colours for those seasons are: Advent~purple/blue, Christmas~white and Epiphany~white.

For those who were part of the United Church before the 1980's you may remember that clergy then primarily wore black Geneva gowns and thereafter began to wear the white alb, joining our Anglican, Lutheran and Roman Catholic sisters and brothers in recognition of our baptismal faith. You see the feeling was that the Geneva gown, originally worn to reflect our belief in the education of the clergy, had become instead a symbol of hierarchy. The move to the alb was to emphasize the unity of all believers as our baptismal faith.

The question never really raised then was "why is it that white is colour of Christmas, the colour of Epiphany, the colour of baptism"?

Well that question is now being asked.

The United Church of Canada is getting serious about what it means to be an Intercultural Church. As our country changes, as more people move to the cities, as cities become more diverse, the people who show up to our churches come from increasingly diverse cultures and traditions. When the United Church asks itself what is our definitive characteristic the response is often "we are an inclusive church". Well, how does an "inclusive church" live out its witness in a country that is no longer limited to a diversity of protestant and catholic, of French and English, of Irish, Scottish and English?

So what is an Intercultural church?

<http://www.united-church.ca/files/intercultural/what-is.pdf>

*Jesus brought together a community of believers. He did not exclude anyone because of race, class, gender, or social norms. He made everyone feel that they belonged...In the history of the church, we have often confused gospel values with the values of the dominant culture. For example, when missionaries came to Canada, they brought the Christian religion to the Aboriginal peoples who live here. They brought European culture with them, too. Often, missionaries taught Christianity and European culture as though they were the same thing.*

Some have asked what is different about “intercultural” than the tradition of “multi-cultural” we have heard so much about in Canada. In essence the difference is one of effect, in a multi-cultural context cultures co-exist, tolerate one another, even respect one another. But there is little sense of transformation in multi-cultural experience. In contrast *“no one is left unchanged in the intercultural process: some examine their own culture more deeply, some are changed through their interaction with others, many learn more about what it means to be in community together.”*

<http://www.united-church.ca/files/intercultural/multicultural-crosscultural-intercultural.pdf>

Which brings us back to the language of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany.

<http://www.united-church.ca/files/intercultural/darkness.pdf>

Adele Halliday from the United Church’s General Council Office makes these observations:

*“Blackmail. Blackhearted. Black as sin. Washed white as snow. Over time, in our English language, we have become accustomed to equating evil as black, and purity as white. Even the dictionary adds credence to this. One dictionary defines “black” as “without any moral quality or goodness; evil; wicked.” The same dictionary defines “white” as “morally pure; innocent.” (from dictionary.com) Similar definitions exist for the words “light” and “dark.”*

*What then do we do when the Bible and Christian rituals are filled with images of light and darkness as goodness and evil, especially (in Epiphany season)...How then, do we speak of darkness and light? Are we simply too sensitive? Do we throw out all biblical references to light? Surely not. What we need is balance...when speaking of darkness and light. Surely we can expand our vocabulary so that darkness does not always equate evil, and light does not always equate good.*

*In reality, darkness can be seen as comfort as a refugee is fleeing a time of war and unrest; light in this circumstance, could lead to death. Darkness could be seen as a wonder to explore, full of Holy Mystery; light, could be seen as a harsh reality, revealing a blinding light.*

If you are a traditionalist and hearing this sermon as yet another attack on your basic beliefs know that progressive or liberal Christians also have much to learn from Intercultural Church. In addition to the hard work we United Church people must do to disentangle our European heritage from the Gospel witness

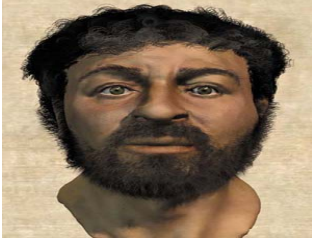
there is also the need for us in the United Church to listen to new Canadian Christians who come to us with a deep appreciation of the word “evangelism”.

Yes that’s right, we in the United Church need to listen to Christians who come from other cultures and other continents who express their faith with a kind of enthusiasm, emotion, and yes, evangelism, that we liberal Christians have not embraced for some time. I remember asking a new Canadian Christian why so many immigrants were attending evangelical churches when the UCC had made such an effort to be inclusive. His response was instructive, *“in the European west there is an inherent bias against expressing emotion, a bias to long, wordy, intellectual, liturgies, a bias that says you need to think faith, not feel it. In evangelical churches there may not be the attention to diversity we see in the UCC but there is an openness to the emotional you rarely see in the UCC.”*

Wenh-In Ng, who was born in Hong Kong, shares this story about coming to Canada and worshipping in the UCC: *I still recall how, during my early years in this country, I attended a well-known non-United Church congregation one Sunday and, unbeknownst to the preacher, got lambasted by him about the United Church’s public concern for social justice and alleged lack of fervour for “evangelism.”*

Adele Halliday points to the ways in which our United Churches need to be discerning about how we live out “being the church”, how we learn from other cultures who also seek to be disciples of Jesus. *People who embrace diverse ways of worshipping God, different ways of singing, unique ways of gathering in community, different concepts of time, of listening, praying, and of hearing one another often feel excluded because they have ways of doing things that are different from the dominant culture. Some First Nations peoples will not speak in a large group unless they have taken time to consult with their entire community; the one who then speaks, speaks for many people in their community, not as an individual. Some African and Caribbean Canadian cultures desire to clap, dance, and engage in call-and-response during worship.*

Let me conclude with two personal stories. In 2002 when Kim and I traveled to Guangdong, China to meet Lucy, I was told by a Chinese-Canadian about a special church that I ought to see. The church was not easy to find and was surrounded by an iron fence. There was no way in so I climbed over the fence. Once inside I looked around, it was filthy, like no one had been using the church for sometime. I thought about how difficult it was for Christians in China to worship the way you and I take for granted. But as I did so I looked around me and realized that all of the images for Jesus, for the disciples, for Mary, were Caucasian. All. I imagined how the Communist rebels who took over China’s government must have felt about the missionaries then who exported more of western culture, European superiority, and the English language than they did the Good News of Jesus.



I also remember a conversation with a woman who had come to Toronto from Shanghai to visit her son. This woman played the piano at her house church, watched all the while by the authorities, putting herself and her family at risk. She told me life for Christians in China had improved with ever increasing trade, access to western culture. But she had a question for me about the United Church. *“I have been coming to your church for several months now”, she said, “and the only time I hear the people speak of Jesus is during the church service. Why don’t your people speak of Jesus any other time?”*

For someone who put herself at some risk to worship God and learn about Jesus it seemed odd to be in a church that seemed to talk about everything and everyone else, save for Jesus.

On this Epiphany Sunday I pray we will take stock of our liturgical trappings; the words we use in worship, the images we use in our church, the hymns we sing about God, to see if they reflect the Jesus who saves or the nostalgia for a 1950’s America, where Jesus looks, sounds and teaches more like a member of the rotary club than someone who would turn the tables upside down at the Temple.

Further, as we in our culture watch our churches shrink and die I pray we would speak to people who come from cultures where the church is alive and growing, to see how the Spirit is moving among us. Let no one say again that the church is “God’s frozen chosen”!



The Magi were said to come from afar, from different races and cultures, to bring gifts to the Saviour. They came as authentic persons from a specific culture, diverse, yet all united by a common faith. None were forced to give up their identity and all expressed their faith by presenting gifts. There is so much

we can learn from each other. Let us listen. Let us grow. Let the Spirit live.  
Amen.