

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon January 6th, 2019 Epiphany

God's Inclusive Light Shines Brightly in our World

On Christmas Eve we heard Luke's Christmas story where a magnificent light of angel chorus shines down on poor shepherds. Inviting them to the manger where Jesus lay. Today, the day of Epiphany, which concludes our Christmas season, we hear Matthew's Christmas story where a bright star shines brightly in the sky guiding gentile astrologers to the house where Jesus is.

In both Luke and Matthew, the central message of their Christmas stories is that all people are invited to the crib of Jesus. Even gentiles. Even the poor. Even your annoying neighbor who never shovels his walk or never picks up his dog's poop off your front lawn. Even you and I. God's inclusive light shines brightly in the sky guiding all of us to the love of God we experience in Christ Jesus.

Unfortunately, we are living in a world where more and more of us are pushing back against Jesus' invitation to be inclusive. For example, we find it more difficult to get along with each other, especially when we have opposing views over contentious issues. We are struggling with the influx of people coming into our countries, which has led to discrimination and an increase in hate crimes towards our immigrant populations. Politically, we are becoming more and more polarized leading to an increase in violent conflicts worldwide. We wrestle to reconnect with our inclusive Christmas message as the Empires we live in are inviting us to be more exclusive.

Like us, Jesus is born into an Empire that promotes exclusivity. The Romans struggled to be accepting to people who believed in something other than the imperial cult religion. In Roman society your acceptance was based on your wealth. The Roman soldiers often treated people who were not Roman poorly. There was a lot of unrest throughout the Empire. Leading to several attempted rebellions.

With the Empire's ways being so influential in society it is not surprising that the religious authorities were impacted by this influence. The high priests

had created so many barriers to enter the Temple that very few people had access to the place where they believed God's presence dwelled. People who stood out due to their behaviors or their ailments were often marginalized to isolated communities within the greater society.

So, when Jesus breaks into the world, and God's invitation to inclusion is heard. An invitation that challenges the Emperor's invitation to exclude others. An invitation that challenges the religious authority's rules that exclude others. We start to see a movement take place where followers of Jesus will attempt to change society into a place that is more inclusive and welcoming. A place where foreigners from the east are welcome. A place where poor shepherds are welcome. A place where the tax collectors, sinners, and lepers are welcome. A place where Gentiles and Jews, women and men, slaves and free are all welcome together as one body.

In fact, the famous Christmas story that promotes inclusivity isn't a new idea. Isaiah prophecies throughout his ministry that God will invite all people to Zion. Gentiles and Jews. The wealthy and the poor. You and I. Everyone. The prophets throughout history challenged the Empires they lived in to be more inclusive.

Like the prophets, like Jesus, like Paul, like the early believers, Matthew and Luke's Christmas stories invite us to be the inclusive people God calls us to be. Despite the Emperors claim that we need to exclude others.

Our Lutheran body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, encourages us to embrace the inclusive message of Christmas. For example, we are invited to break down social barriers for women by welcoming the ordination of women. By creating inclusive language policies that help women connect more deeply to the scriptures. By standing up against people who oppress and objectify women.

The ELCIC invites us to challenge stereotypes that have led to our inability to accept those who come from other places or who stand out from the norm. We have created several studies to help educate people about who we call the other. We are empowered by this education and invitation to be a voice for the marginalized.

In the first week of February religions all over the world will come together in their respected communities for interfaith harmony week. In Calgary, our

topic this year is “We choose civility: Listening, Caring, Engaging.” We hope to encourage people of all walks of life to respect and love one another, especially when trying to resolve contentious issues in our world. We choose inclusivity. We choose harmony and peace.

It is time for us to gracefully challenge those voices out there that are encouraging us to exclude others. It is time to look towards the star. To see the angel chorus. To believe in the Christmas message that says the gospel is challenging not only ourselves but our world to be a place of peace and inclusivity. A place where people strive for harmony not conflict.

When the people from the far east come to see Jesus, they bring gifts fit for a king. Matthew shares this story to encourage the early believers to place Jesus first in their lives. To continue to proclaim God’s inclusive message even if the Empire they live in is preaching the complete opposite.

We all know what it feels like to be excluded. Whether we were not invited to a party or didn’t feel welcome at a community event or were turned down by a friend or loved one or were judged or were misunderstood.

Jesus comes into our lives to welcome us. To shine God’s inclusive light in our lives inviting us to where Jesus is. Empowering us to be who God created us to be. Beloved people of God living together in harmony and peace.

May we all hear the Christmas stories in a way that rings louder than the voices out there that keep trying to turn us against each other.

Let us pray, loving God, we give thanks that your light shines on all of us inviting us to the manger. Inviting us to the house where Jesus is. Showing us that through your Son we are all welcome. Empower us with your inclusive love to imitate this love to everyone we encounter. **Amen.**