

Feast of the Epiphany  
January 6, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

The Community of Christ's Cradle:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Thursday was the anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood – my golden anniversary. Four years ago, on January 3, I was ordained to the priesthood. Each year at this time I spend time reflecting on my vows and on my journey to priesthood. I remember the journey

- \*the early stirrings of a call to ministry

- \*the role silence has played in

- my journey

- \*the doors that seemed shut and the doors that blew wide open totally on their own

- \*the many people who accompanied me on my journey

- \*and at the very core of it the crèche, the cradle, the table and the marvelously diverse community that grows up around the cradle of the Holy Child of God.

Slowly the scene comes together – first the empty crèche, then the straw, then Mary and Joseph, and on Christmas Eve – the baby Jesus. Shepherds following the star gather there. And now, today, the Magi come. They, too, have been following the star.

What a community that is – that community of the crèche. Joseph, the righteous Jew. Mary, a mother out of season. A woman shunned and shamed. A couple turned away by family and friends. Shepherds fresh from the hills. Angels. Animals gathered around the manger. The Magi weary from a long journey. And you and I as well – all gathered around a baby. All gathered around a king. All gathered around the Holy One of God. What an odd community. No one in their right mind would assemble such a group. Hardly people you would bring together around a dinner table. And yet....

Here we all are. Gathered together to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. Gathered together to celebrate God's manifesting God's self to Magi from the East and shepherds from the fields, gathered together in hunger and in hope, gathered together to feast at a table big enough to embrace both Jews and Gentiles, shepherds and scholars, gathered together to worship the one who comes to us as a baby and walks with us to the cross.

Here, in the story of the Magi, at the very core of our faith, we see unfolding God's unbounded love. This is the story not of doors slamming shut, but of doors left open so that others might come in. This is the story of outsiders gathering at the center of the new community forming around the Christ child.

What fascinates me about this story of the Magi is how they got to Bethlehem in the first place. Their journey started way in the East when they saw a new star rising. Curious folk that they were, they set off to investigate the arc of that star. Theirs was an arduous journey. T.S. Eliot describes it well in his poem "The Journey of the Magi":

'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'

I can imagine some lose heart. But still they stay the course; but still they follow the star.

And then they fall off track. They head not for Bethlehem – they didn't even know about Bethlehem – but for Jerusalem, the royal city, surely the place where they would find the new born king.

Think of it – think of how those Magi, found their way to Bethlehem, to the cradle and to the Christ child. They responded to a hunger stirring deep inside them, they followed a star, and then, when they seemed to have lost their way, help comes from a most unlikely source – King Herod, one of the most unsavory characters they could meet. Sure he was planning on using them. But he got them back on track. They, too, come to the foot of the cradle.

The community of the cradle, the community of the crèche, is complete--all gathered around the baby, all gathered around the Holy One of God, all gathered around the Christ Child.

Think of how they got there – the shepherds followed angels, Joseph listened to his dreams. Mary just said "yes" to God and was carried along the way. The animals were there already and just looked up. The Magi came from quite a distance.

Isn't it true of you and me as well – don't some of us come to Christ's cradle from some most unlikely places? Haven't we ourselves been on some arduous journeys to the cradle of the Holy One of God? You know our journeys

themselves are part of the gift we bring to the cradle – our doubts, our hopes, our disappointments and our dreams.

As we gather – the shepherds, the Magi, and you and I, we look around. And what we see is really quite surprising. Not the people you'd expect in the birth chamber of a king.

Think of it. At the very center of the Christian story is a community of difference. Each drawn by the light of Christ. Each bringing their own special gifts. And so it is with you and me. We each bring our own gifts to lay at the feet of the Christ child. Our differences are part of the gifts we bring.

One of the great gifts of our faith and our Anglican tradition is the honoring of differences within community. For though we come from different places and we follow different journeys and we bring different gifts to the table, we are one in Christ.

The challenge is living in a community of diversity. Ask any couple that has lived together for a long time! It's only human to feel more at home when the people seated around the table think like us, look like us, live like us. It's only human to think that those who think or live or believe as we do are on the right track – the road to Bethlehem if you will; and those with a different take on things or a different living arrangement have veered off track. We only have to look at the headlines to know that. Look at the tribal violence taking place in Kenya this week. Or even closer to home – look at how the divisions in the Episcopal Church in Petaluma reflect an exclusionary way of approaching the world.

But that is not the world to which the star beckons us.

My friends, look again at the community gathered around Christ's cradle – it a community of difference – deep differences – held together by a willingness to be vulnerable to God's reconciling love. It's a community of people who see the face of God reflected in the face of the other. It's a community of people open to the radical change the Christ child brings to the world and to the lives of those gathered around the cradle.