

“Us”

January 10, 2021

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

We have just completed the Christmas season. After worship today, the worship team is scheduled to come in and take down the decorations. Christmas has a whole bunch of tangents that go with it, but the main theme or message is the coming of Emmanuel – God with us. The God who created the universe and everything within it, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; the God of Moses, Samuel, and David; God came down to earth as a person to be with us. Eventually Jesus went on to save us, but at Christmas, the message is God with us.

That is the message of Matthew’s first chapter. In the second chapter, instead of going forward to define and tell the story of God come to earth to be with us, it defines us. It reminds us who the us is that God came to be with. If the traditions we have claimed about the wisemen or magi are even close to true, they must have been a strange and offensive sight to the faithful Jews of Bethlehem. They looked different with the different races we have assigned to the different wisemen. They sounded different, probably speaking a different dialect of Greek or at least speaking it with a different accent. They traveled differently (most of the manger scenes I have include camels). And they bring strange gifts for a baby shower. (Extra diapers would have been more practical and appropriate than myrrh). They were obviously strangers from way out of town. But it wasn’t until the conversation started that the wisemen moved from strange to offensive. “Welcome to Bethlehem,” says the local welcoming committee. “What brings you to town?” “We are here to see the infant, the newborn king of the Jews.” “Oh, well they have moved from the stable into a house. How did you hear about our town and the child? Did you get a hold of some of our sacred texts and read about Him or did some of our faithful merchants tell you of Him while they were selling you some of our quality goods?” “No, we saw His star rise up the sky and we followed it to this place.” That is when things got offensive. These people were not followers of God. They were stargazers, astrology people. They might as well read palms and tea leaves or let the roll of the dice define their every move like they were playing dungeons and dragons. The people of God have known since before the time of King Saul that God did not approve of fortune telling and astrology. But yet they are here. They came to the right place. And they did not come to conquer us or convert us, but to worship. They did not come to tell us how stupid we are or say we were right all along. They came to worship and bring gifts. The Old Testament prophecies said the nations would be coming to bring tribute, to acknowledge Israel’s superior ways, and place themselves under us. They were not here to do any of that. They came to worship the Child of God, just like us.

Jesus was born here in Bethlehem so God would be with us. Now these heathen foreigners are here acting like God came to be with them too. Like they are part of the us in Emmanuel's God with us. But how can that be? They didn't do it right. They were not born into the faith. They didn't learn about God from someone testifying to them. They didn't even read the Scriptures before starting off on their journey. They didn't do it right. Yet they are here.

In just the second chapter of the New Testament, the Bible is helping us see that God will use any means possible to help people come to Jesus. God has used strange things before. God got Moses' attention with a bush that was on fire but not burning up. God got Pharaoh's attention using frogs, gnats and locusts. God has used hunger and physical brokenness. God has used draughts, dreams, and lightning bolts. God even used Zacchaeus' shortness to make a point. God uses some really strange stuff to bring people to Him – even astrology. So my question today is: is there anything strange about you?

Yes, we are living in a strange time right now. Churches having to limit the number of people who can come to in-person worship. Congregations who have always claimed their loving community of people as their best feature suddenly find themselves virtual. It is strange. But God is using it. People are church shopping online and connecting with communities of faith. People are recognizing again how small and fragile life-as-we-know-it is, and are looking for something more solid and long term. It is a strange time, but God is using it to help expand again the definition of us in God with us.

So, is there anything strange about you? Better yet, are you willing to offer your strangeness to God to be used by God? I know a guy from Kokomo who really liked playing softball. A little strange I know, but a grown man, married with children still went out with the boys and played softball. His team had a bit of a reputation in the league. They were good, but also a bit rowdy. They were known for their cussing and drinking as much as their play. Well, this guy became a Christian and realized his softball team was not the environment he needed to be in to nurture his new-found faith. So he quit. He was out for an entire season nurturing his faith, but he really missed playing softball. So he did what he was supposed to do. He started a church softball team. No! He went back to his old team, and they were happy to take him back. He could still hit and cover left field, but something was different. He didn't cuss much anymore. When it was his turn to buy the beer, he still bought, but he also provided alternative beverages. As a matter of fact, he brought those alternative beverages even when it wasn't his turn to buy. He talked different and interacted with them differently than before, but never judged or preached. He was just different. After two seasons, three members of his team had joined his church and others have visited. I know another person who just really likes 4-H. Long after her children aged out of the program, she remained. For another it was scouting. Another coaching youth soccer with a special attention to

building relationships with the parents as well as the kids. For another it was golf, another playing bridge, for another it was reading and book club.

Is there anything strange about you? God uses the strange, because this world is filled with strange people and sometimes it takes something a little out of the ordinary to reach them. The parting of the Red Sea, a virgin birth, a death on a cross that heals sin, or a person who really likes Star Wars. God uses strange things to share the way to life to this world – a star in the sky and a Facebook app on a computer. Is there anything strange or non-traditional about you that God can use to bring a strange, non-traditional person to God-with-us? You give it to God and let God use it.

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