

CAN CAROLS CALL FOLKS TO FAITH ?

Mason, January 2, 2022

Isaiah 60:1-6, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

If I were to name today's remarks, it would be along the lines of "Can Christmas carols call folks to faith?" Are the carols we share today and so many others we sing every year *only* for the further building of ourselves who call ourselves Christians? Or can they have an impact on people who do not enter the doors of this or any other church? That is, were these carols that we love to sing written by those who believe the Good News of Christ's birth for - and only for - those of us who repeat them in this space? Or are there some notes of evangelistic outreach in them? Think of those masses of people who more or less absorb the sounds of carols blasted out from a thousand shopping mall speakers. Does anything in the words or music ever make a difference to them? The message of the season is that "Jesus Christ has been born to save." But save who and how many? What about those who take Santa and Rudolph and Frosty to be the sum total of what Christmas is all about?

Our Scripture passages today, each in their own way, may have long-ago folks such as these in mind. In our Isaiah reading, they are spoken of as "the nations" – that is, all the people who surround the nation of Israel, but who do not know God and never will be counted as God's chosen people. *Or will they* – someday? The Jewish people of Isaiah's ancient time, and still today, are not "evangelistic" in nature – that is, reaching out to non-believers and bring them into their fold. They do not proselytize, as some religions are known for. And yet, here and in other places in Isaiah, as well as in other books of what we call the Old Testament, we have this theme that God himself will accomplish a new thing, that God has a deep concern for these other nations of the earth, and that at some future time, He will draw *all* peoples to himself. This is the theme of Epiphany that we observe today and specifically January 6. In your bulletin, Bill has provided more detail on the meaning of the day. Our hymnal has a section of carols on this post-Christmas observance.

From the very beginning to the very end, the Bible takes “the nations” seriously. As early as the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, the Bible’s first book, more than 70 different ethnic groups are mentioned in the generations after Noah. And in the Bible’s final book, Revelation, we read, “a great multitude, which no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, stand before the throne of the Lamb.” This is what God will do; these are the people whom God will draw to himself. Through Jesus, God will find a way to carry forth his salvation.

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew, the familiar story of the wise men, what the Old Testament calls “the nations” are represented by these figures, traditionally three, though we are not told how many they are. They obviously are not Jews, but Gentiles “from the East.” Their story is told at this early January time of Epiphany, signaling the coming of salvation not only to Jews, but now to the ends of the earth. In the words of our carol, “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice,” we sing, as in an invitation “Calls you *one* and calls you *all* to gain his everlasting hall.” There is in fact an evangelistic theme in many of our familiar carols.

This summons to universal salvation is what the apostle Paul stresses here and throughout his letter to the Ephesians. It is, in fact, central to all we know of Paul, both in his letters and in his career as outlined in the Book of Acts. By the time of Jesus and of Paul, Jews were using the word “Gentiles” to mean all those who were not among God’s chosen ones. Again, Jews had an ambivalent attitude toward these non-Jews. Under certain circumstances and a complex ritual process, Gentiles could convert to Judaism, but it was not especially encouraged. At the same time, there in the magnificent Temple recently built by Herod was included an area called the “Court of the Gentiles,” located at the outer fringe of the Temple complex. Here non-Jews could meet and overhear bits and pieces of Jewish wisdom that emanated from the sacred space. It was as if people could stand maybe on the tree lawn here outside our church and hear snatches of the service through the open windows.

But Paul wants to take things far beyond that. In the eyes of God, he is saying, and through the acts of Christ, all people are open to salvation. When we sing the carol “Infant Holy, Infant Lowly,” as we did a few minutes ago, and come to those words, “Christ the babe was born for you,” Paul would take the word “you” both for individual believers, but also as a plural – all you out there in God’s world: This is meant for you!

So now we ask, What is our part in getting this Christmas message, this Good News, out to all the people for whom Christ was born, and for whom God his heavenly Father caused him to come to this earth in this way? A few weeks ago a clerk in a store wished me a Merry Christmas. I wished him back the same. But did either of us know a thing about the other? Did his perfunctory wish assume I’d be celebrating this particular holiday, and did my casual response assume the same for him? Should I have made it my business to take it a step further? Just who are today’s “Gentiles” about whose eternal salvation Paul was so concerned? What is our responsibility to them, we faithful few who have gathered in this church on this day, full of faith, full of hope for a better year in 2022?

We do not have all the answers. There is no sharp dividing line between us and the Gentiles of our time. But we know our faith. We do have a message to share, either quietly in the ear of our neighbor, or as in our opening carol, “Go, Tell It on the Mountain” “that Jesus Christ is born.” Is it enough that the “Christmas spirit” pervades our society for this brief time each year? Is this what Christmas has become? Is it enough? Here we are in a new year. It is a weird time, but as good a time as any to think beyond ourselves, to that friend or neighbor in the “Gentile” world. You’ve heard me say before that if you are pleased with what is happening here in the message and outreach of this congregation, why not share it? You don’t have to do it all. You don’t have to preach the whole faith. But take that first inviting step to someone you care about. Make them part of this fellowship to which God has already called you. “Come and worship, come and worship Christ the newborn King!” CAH