Invitation to the Table

With twelve days of Christmas, we don't always get two Sundays. Today gets in under the wire: the eleventh day of Christmas.

So, on this Second Sunday of Christmas, the church continues to ponder the meaning of the Incarnation. God is not distant from us, detached, uninvolved. The Word has become flesh, the babe at Bethlehem, and has moved in with us—in the original language of John's gospel, "The Word became flesh and pitched tent among us."

But, turns out, this was not the God Israel expected; although, many Christian traditions continue to rationalize Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel's hope of a military hero and political leader that would restore past glories of their kingdom.

John says the Word came to his own and his own neither recognized nor received him.

When we realize God came to us, not as that warrior king, showing up instead as a baby, born into a marginalized human family, we discover the challenge of receiving the God who is, rather than the God we may try to force into the mold of our expectations.

And so, we come to this table where we are reminded that the God who came to us in the Bethlehem manger is the God who loves sacrificially, and for whom not even a cross will stop the accomplishment of the divine nature and purpose.

Our hymn of communion is #392, "Draw Us in the Spirit's Tether"

- Jenn's family—Friday will be the final adoption hearing for Ryder.

God who comes to us not from a throne or a palace or an oval office but in a manger, we thank you that when all you are and all you intend became flesh, you united heaven and earth; in a manger there is no difference between human life and divine life.

We thank you that, since, limited as we are by the clay of which we are made, we could not come to you, you came to us—you pitched tent among us—you moved into the neighborhood; and you never left. And when all you are and all you intend became flesh, our humanity was lifted it. In the flesh, we saw your nature and your intentions to be our God and for us to be your people.

Light into our darkness, shine among us. Show us not only your glory but also how we might live in your light and witness to your glory.

Help us to recognize you and greet you as you are—born in us and among us. As we gather at the beginning of a New Year, enable us to see you in the gift of a fresh start, a new beginning with you, with each other, and with ourselves.

Because all that you are and all that you intend became flesh, we have hope of being new people in your name.

Amen.

Home by Another Way

EPHESIANS 3:1-7, 11-12 (NRSVUE) *This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you gentiles, [2]for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you [3]and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, [4]a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. [5]In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: [6]that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. … [11]This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, [12]in whom we have access in boldness and confidence through faith in him.* **The Word of God for the people of God!**

In recent months I've become increasingly aware of a crucial element of faith I've under-emphasized in my ministry and personal life. Nor do I find significant emphasis of that element in the Christian community at large. Specifically, I refer to the unity and continuity of the central message within the Judeo/Christian Scriptures. We tend to focus on specific landmarks along way.

Before we had a GPS, Jo Lynn and I used AAA 'trip ticks' when we traveled. There'd be a good, up-to-date, printed map with a yellow highlight marking our route. And there'd be a spiral notebook with detailed map close-ups. Christian teaching is pretty good at examining the detailed map close-ups; but the map with the complete route highlighted too often gets laid aside.

In 2017 we bought a new car with a built-in GPS—and we started off on a road trip. The first day out we were half-way to Memphis, and the GPS told us traffic was stopped ahead, and we should get off the Interstate. So we did. Sure enough, as we drove along the county road paralleling the Interstate we could see traffic gridlocked for miles. We were convinced we'd never have to look at a map again.

A few days later we decided to change our destination, so we put the new information into the GPS and ended up on a one-lane, dirt logging road somewhere in North Carolina. The road wasn't even on the map. we were lost and so was the GPS!

In Alaska, our GPS took us hours out of our way and got us to our destination in the middle of the night. Technology has improved, but sometimes you need a map.

There are a lot of side trips and detours in the Scriptures, and even wrong turns. The faith journey gets off track when we focus on those side trips. We get lost in the wrong turns. The central theme follows a consistent route from Eden to Bethlehem but beware of wild goose chases. If the identified route runs true, it leads to Christ; and some things that are biblical are not Christlike.

So, does that mean part of the Bible's not true? Of course, not! But truth is not always fact; and it may mean we need to continually update our guidelines for understanding biblical truth.

Last week I shared Richard Rohr's idea that the first Incarnation was creation: GENESIS 1:1-3 ***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. 3And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.***

Note the similarity with the opening verses of John's Gospel: (JOHN 1:1-5, 14) ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2He was with God in the beginning. 3Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome (****or understood****) it. … 14The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.***

Maybe you picked up on the theme of light it runs throughout the Bible—more than 330 times from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. God's intentions and purposes—the light—are fully present in creation. Just look at nature's interdependence and harmony; and God's vision for humanity never changes: created in the divine image as partners in fulfilling those intentions stated so clearly in the covenant with Abraham: "through you all peoples of the earth will be blessed." And God's intentions are most clearly demonstrated in the flesh: in Jesus of Nazareth.

Today's reading from Ephesians is a landmark along the route that began in creation—the path that is straight and narrow and sometimes hard to find. In Ephesions it's called the mystery of Christ: "***…that is, the gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ…"***

In Christ, the mystery is solved—the light shines in the darkness. What God wills is the harmony and unity and inclusiveness made plain in the covenant with Abraham: "through you all peoples of the earth will be blessed."

God's nature and purpose are fully disclosed—the mystery is made known; the light shines in the darkness—long before the personal Incarnation happened with the birth of Jesus." In Jesus, God is shouting, "This is what I've meant all along!"

Tuesday is Epiphany. Again, the theme is light—the word itself means "to shine." Epiphany is the unveiling of God's intentions revealed to all creation.

But again, there is not just one Epiphany! Today's reading from Ephesians confirms the wonder of Epiphany as the mysterious inclusion of Gentiles as part of God's people. Christianity celebrates Epiphany as a new thing; but in reality, it is but a reaffirmation of what was established in the Abrahamic Covenant: "Through you all peoples of the earth will be blessed…"

The prophets of Israel confirmed it. Consider Isaiah's familiar words, ***"In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains…and all nations will stream to it." (2:2)*** That's just one of 102 times the prophets lift up the universal inclusiveness of God's grace.

John's reference to Epiphany is in chapter 12:20-23: ***Now there were some***

Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus. Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified."

Luke connects Epiphany with Pentecost, when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and when they spoke, …***a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't these who speak Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; Rome; Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"*** (ACTS 2:6-11)

Matthew connects through the familiar story of Wise Men—gentiles "from the east." It's a story tangled in politics corrupted by paranoia, tyranny, and narcissism.

Herod was appointed King of Judea by Mark Antony and ruled with an iron fist. He's known for colossal building projects, but also for manic cruelty and paranoia. His secret police spied and reported the feelings of the people toward him. He used his military to put down protests, and had opponents removed by force. He even killed his own sons when he perceived them as threats to his throne. Caesar Augustus is reported to have said, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

Jewish historian, Josephus says Herod suffered a long illness that was physically and mentally debilitating. It was during his final years that these wise men from the east came asking, "Where is the child born king of the Jews (red flag words)? Herod said, "When you find him, let me know where, so I also can go and worship him."

We know the story. They found the child, but the story ends, ***"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."***

Their journey, guided by some mysterious phenomenon of astronomy represents the universal reach of God's nature and purpose—described in today's text as "the mystery of Christ, ***"that is, the gentiles have become members of the same body...***

Their return "by another road" is not just a detour, but a metaphor for transformation and discernment. Encountering Jesus, the light, leads to a new path—one shaped by revelation rather than worldly standards. In the context of Epiphany, God's purposes often are perceived and followed in unexpected ways.

And equally important to where the new path leads is what it leaves behind: social, political, and even religious systems of exclusion and marginalization: systems that deny human access to basic needs: security, health, inclusion, and dignity.

To go home by another road is to become part of the wider story of blessing "all peoples of the earth." On this first Sunday of the new year, the Sunday before Epiphany, it seems advisable to pull out the map to be sure we're on the right road.

Pray with me.