

The story of the Christ's birth in Luke, the narrative shared on Christmas Eve with angels and shepherds and a stable, is a largely Judean narrative. It's a *Jewish story with Judean characters located in the land of Judah*. Mary and Joseph travel to the Judean town of Bethlehem because, as the story goes, Joseph is descended from King David – that makes him very Judean, related to the greatest Judean – and Bethlehem is David's town – deep in the Judean heartland.

The town name, Bethlehem, scholars usually say is from the local language – it means *house of bread*. Except house of bread is a name ill-suited for a hilly town on the edge of the Judean wilderness. There is not a lot of bread made in Bethlehem, not a lot of grain grown on its fertile hills. The region is known for olive trees and for grazing sheep. Its olive oil, wool and meat that Bethlehem was known for...Shepherds in Bethlehem's fields witness the birth of Jesus. Bethlehem is known for sheep.

So recently scholars have wondered if the name of this most Judean of places is in fact a name given to the town by outsiders. It's not a Judean place name. In Arabic, in the language of the nomads and traders of the ancient Middle East, Bethlehem would mean "house of meat". Or "house of the Lambs". That's a more fitting name of Jesus birth place. In Jesus day Bethlehem teamed with livestock.

Writer Nicholas Blincoe, in his history of the town called Bethlehem notes that it is often the outsider who gives the name to a place. It's the people who are travelling to a place that have to give it a descriptive name so that they will know it when they find it.

So Bethlehem is a place name given by outsiders. Luke's birth narrative is an insiders story Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus which we share in Epiphany focuses on outsiders. Magi from the East come from afar bringing gifts.

We celebrate on Epiphany Sunday the coming of the Magi to find the Christ child. Jesus was born a Jew, born in Jewish province to Jewish parents. His coming was anticipated in the Jewish tradition, in Jewish scripture, by Jewish prophets.

But then come the Magi. These learned men lived far from the Jewish homeland. They were raised in another tradition and language and culture. These travellers come from the land beyond the distant Euphrates River and unlike the Jews who studied the Law and Prophets of Israel, these learned travellers studied the sky.

These outsiders come to find a child whose birth was proclaimed in the heavens. They come to see what God has done, not just for the Jews, but for them too and for all the world. The stars above proclaim the news of Christ's birth to everyone who can look up and see, wherever they are. God signals the good news to the whole planet and in the magi and their journey we see the people from beyond the Judean narrative recognizing the significance of this birth. And they

bring gifts.

Remember when you were a child and you went to a friend's house for the first time. And you found it was different than your house? People spoke to each other in a different way. They treated each other differently. Their kitchens had different smells. The food they ate was different. Or their sense of home décor was very different. I recall visiting a friend's house as a teenager and being overwhelmed by the bold patterns of wall paper that clashed so violently with the strong patterns on the furniture. It was an experience of sensory overload.

And then going into the homes of others makes you wonder. Experiencing the homes of others leads you to think about your own. Does my kitchen have unique culinary fragrances? What are they? What does my house smell like? How do we speak to each other? What visual impression does our house make to people coming in for the first time? Exposure to something different makes you realize that you might have your own peculiarities.

The writer Peter Rollins speaks of the gift that the outsider brings. People from outside our normal experience may seem strange and may have strange ways. But then it helps us to see that we too may be strange when seen from the outside. To the outsider what we consider normal and right may be something other...

The Magi come to Jesus and bring gifts. And do they as outsiders see something that those closer to the story might miss? They bring gold a gift fit for a King and Jesus would be called a King. Frankincense is a perfume used in anointing the sick and Jesus would be a great healer. Myrrh is a perfume used to embalm a dead body, so does this gift foreshadow the future...The magi are outsiders bringing gifts. And all outsiders come bringing gifts: the gift of perspective or of insight that insiders cannot have; the gift of challenging old ways and of presenting new ways; of creating new possibilities; of opening us to new directions... Outsiders bring the gift of a new awareness of our own strangeness. They help us to see ourselves with greater clarity.

And in many ways the one who receives the magi's gifts is an outsider too. Mystic and monk Thomas Merton: *Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ comes uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons.... With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world.*

We live in an era where some call for us to shun the outsider. Populist politicians want us to fear those who are beyond whatever circles of belonging they might construct around us. But on opening up to the outsider we may be surprised by the gifts that they bring...

We have been working, as a congregation on becoming an affirming congregation, a church that is truly open to the diversity of the world around us and to the diversity found in God's children. Part of the work of becoming affirming is casting a vision of our life together. And a

draft vision statement has been written. It's soon coming to a congregational meeting near you. I would like to share it with you...

Rideau Park United Church is a vibrant faith community that seeks to embody a loving God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We recognize that, in order to reflect God's love and grace, and to faithfully follow in the path of Jesus, we are called to honour all God's children for their unique gifts, and to promote peace, social justice and a healthy environment as we work together to deepen our own spiritual growth.

We share in worship, prayer and learning, and we offer care and support to all, including those of diverse ages, abilities, gender identities and sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, religions, and economic backgrounds. All are invited to participate fully, with mutual respect, in the life and work of the church.

One line in particular jumps out for me on this Epiphany Sunday: *"we are called to honour all God's children for their unique gifts"*

May we be open to all God`s children, those from inside and those coming from the outside. May we honor all for the gifts that they bring.

Amen