



**EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD**  
**JANUARY 6, 2019**  
**MATTHEW 2: 1-12**  
**"ONE TRIBE"**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

One of my friends in seminary was the son of a Lutheran missionary to South America. They traveled to a small coastal village where the primary occupation was fishing. A celebration was held to mark their arrival and, as the eldest son, he had a place of honor among the villagers. According to local custom, a feast was prepared. As an esteemed guest, my friend, about ten years old, had placed before him a delicacy among the villagers. A large, bulging, gelatinous fish eye. He was exquisitely aware of the villagers who gathered around him, happily and excitedly gazing at him as they waited for him to eat this honored entrée.

Which he did.

One way to think about the human experience is that we all are members of various tribes. With our own customs, rituals, and signs of belonging.

We can think of marriage as a member of one tribe joining with a member of another tribe.

One tribe opens presents on Christmas Eve, while one tribe opens presents on Christmas Day. One tribe goes to Grandma's for Christmas brunch while the other tribe always hosts the Christmas dinner. We all have to work through these different customs if we are to establish our own new tribe.

We are the CLC tribe and also members of the larger *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America* tribe. Some of us are part of the Millvale tribe which is part of the larger Pittsburgh tribe. And members of the Millvale, Shaler, North Hills, Etna, Lawrenceville tribes join together with other tribes as the Steelers, Penguins, or Pirates tribe. All of us part of the keystone state tribe and the larger American tribe, but broken down into various ethnic tribes.

Presently, the white male tribe is taking a lot of heat. The female tribe is on the rise. There is tension between White, Black, and Hispanic tribes. The conservative and progressive tribes are at one another's throats. The religious right tribe and mainline tribe can't seem to communicate, even though we all say we belong to the Jesus tribe.

There are seemingly countless ways to consider the tribalism that lurks just under the surface.

Having been Pastor of Lutheran tribes in North Carolina, Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, and now Pennsylvania, I have experienced how different each Lutheran tribe can be.

For example, in my second congregation in Ohio, the Sanctuary was constructed with glass panels separating the narthex from the Sanctuary. During the singing of **Silent Night** on my

first Christmas Eve there, the entire congregation turned around, faced the glass, and slowly began to raise their candles up and down. I found out later that a former Pastor suggested they do it because you could see the candlelight refracted in the glass.

But, it was shocking and unsettling to me, who had not been tipped off to this tribal ritual, that I thought maybe they next would sacrifice an infant. Or the Pastor....

When we are psychologically contained in the tribe, unconsciously we tend to think that everyone else just knows what to do.

A man lay dying and he began yelling, "I need a priest! I need a priest!

Another man came along and asked what was wrong.

The dying man replied, "I am dying and need a priest to give me last rites."

"There are no priests around here," said the man, "but maybe I can help. I am not a religious man, but I have lived next to a Catholic church my entire life and I hear the Roman Ritual all the time, I think I can say it for you."

The dying man cried, "Oh, thank you. Thank you."

So, the man leaned in close and in a soft voice repeated, "b-6, n-33, g-52, i-24."

Every tribe has its own ways of doing things. And a critical way to measure the spiritual health and the religious maturity of a tribe is this: "How easy is it to move in and out of any given tribe?"

Let me share one final tribal challenge. When a congregation starts to grow, as ours has at CLC, it becomes apparent there are two tribes. The first tribe we could call the Oldtimers.

You who have been around and, perhaps, are used to things being done a certain way—perhaps for decades.

And then we have the second tribe who we could call the New Kids on the Block. You don't know the old customs. When an Oldtimer mentions PG, you don't know that means Pastor George and they have no experience of him. And you have no way of relating.

An old way of doing things is just one way of doing something. And, the New Kids on the Block may have different ways of doing something in mind. And new kids may have different skills and spiritual gifts that open CLC up to new ministries.

Everyone in both tribes has to be conscious and aware if members of both tribes integrate as the one CLC tribe. I'll keep you posted on how we're doing....

In the Bible, this entire matter is addressed under the mantle of hospitality.

The god-centered motivation for hospitality begins in the old testament. Perhaps the clearest text is in the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus: "when a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

German Lutherans, in particular, would be well to remember that we were once strangers in this land and treated poorly.

Before world war I, most Germans still spoke, worshipped, and schooled their children in our native tongue.

But world war I changed everything. Germans became suspect. Lutheran altars were desecrated and Lutheran pastors tar-and-feathered. The **only reason** Germans were not deported was because there were too many of us so it was not logistically feasible. How fragile our tribes.

For the people of God in the Old Testament, the value of hospitality came from the very nature of God: I am the lord your god who made a home for you and brought you there with all my might and all my soul. Therefore, you shall love the stranger as yourself. You shall then be holy as i am holy, your values will then mirror my values.

This theme of hospitality continues to be central in the new testament and to the season of epiphany which we celebrate this morning.

The story of the Magi who visit Jesus is a curious one. Scripture says they came from the east. But if they were east of Israel and saw His star in the east, they would have traveled to India. So, obviously, they traveled west.

What's going on here?

In Hebrew, the word "east" also means "rising." So, an accurate translation is "we saw His star at its rising."

According to Matthew 2, the Wise Men arrive with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Rich people possess gold and gold was mined in Arabia. More specifically, frankincense and myrrh are harvested from trees that only grow in south Arabia. Wealthy Arabians would naturally have had all three: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The early Church was aware of this and it figures into their stories and their theology.

So, if we keep our eyes focused on the big picture of the themes of the Old Testament value of hospitality, the Christmas story, and the Epiphany visitation, what do we have?

That the Incarnation of God in Jesus welcomes and includes the outcast tribe of shepherds and the three wise men from a noble tribe. He welcomes the shepherds who are from the Jewish tribe and the wise men who are of the Gentile tribe. He includes the Israeli tribe and the Arabian tribe. He embraces the poor shepherd tribe and the wealthy wise men

tribe. He even includes the Astrologers tribe, who were formerly condemned in the Old Testament.

**The light of the Christ Child shining in the season of Epiphany illuminates and encompasses all the tribes!**

The light of Christ—the star of Epiphany brings all of us in one tribe.

It is sin that causes suspicion and separation. It is the evil one who brings fear and failure. It is the adversary who brings mistrust and misgiving. These come from the darkness and they, too, must be brought into the light.

One way to think about grace is that grace is the hospitality of god who welcomes all of us as sinners, not because of our goodness, but because of his kindness and compassion....

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, I presided at the funeral of one of the tribe of Oldtimers at CLC, Don Braun.

Don was quite a guy. His mother died when he was two and so he and his older brother were placed in an orphanage. Rather than growing up resentful and angry; blaming any struggles in life on the bad hand dealt to him, Don remained an optimistic, friendly, and welcoming presence here at CLC and everywhere. He raised four children who adored him and a horde of grandchildren and great-grandchildren who did the same.

Here at CLC, Don would thread little white lights through the poinsettias each Christmas. At Easter, he would weave a beautiful Cross out of palm leaves that no one since has been able to replicate.

His son, Keith, spoke these words at the funeral: “Dad had two attributes that stand out: kindness and compassion. Tomorrow is New Year’s Day, the beginning of a new year. And with that, people make resolutions on bettering their lives. I am asking everyone here to

join me by honoring my Dad and his legacy by making one more resolution. Let's try to spread his kindness and compassion. Kind of a like a pay it forward.

Let's face it. In a world that at times can be filled with hatred and greed and rudeness; more kindness and compassion is what we need.

The world at large and most Christian congregations still have not internalized the Biblical messages of hospitality, the Christmas Story, and Epiphany.

Most still struggle to get past the prejudice and sin of their small-minded tribalism with loyalty to their last names, the color of their skin, their ethnic background, their religious denomination, the length of time as members of a congregation.

My friends, Jesus Christ—the light of the world—beckons us to the salt, the leaven, the light not hidden under the bushel basket that makes this place different and makes a difference in our families, neighborhoods, communities, and places of employment.

Otherwise, we spread as much darkness as those who do not follow Christ. Let's make a difference—let's be the One Tribe of Light.

- **NEARER TO YOU** BY ELVIS COSTELLO AND ALLEN TOUSSAINT