

Christmas Through the Eyes of the Other  
Christmas Eve, 2012  
Caldwell Presbyterian Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn

It was a hodge-podge, mix and match group that first Christmas.

There were Joseph and Mary, nervous enough as first parents and all that involves, strung out from looking for a place to bed the night – to say nothing of their larger questions about what in the world God was doing with them and through them.

There were the magi, rich and powerful and elegantly dressed, having traveled there first class, as it were. They came to honor the infant child of a peasant woman for reasons they may not have fully understood at the time.

There were the shepherds, men who spent most of their time in the outdoors with livestock, looking and probably smelling a little like it. Traditional depictions of that first Christmas often include a few sheep brought by the shepherds, lambs to meet the lamb of God. By some accounts, there were angels, and over the years traditions have added others, including a little drummer boy.

As they beheld the Christ child that night, each looked through a different set of eyes, each brought their own life experience and perspective to the wonder of that event. All saw the same thing, but each saw it in a different way.

What if? What if each could witness the majesty of the moment not just through their eyes but through the eyes of the other?

The magi through the eyes of the shepherds, and vice versa?

Mary and Joseph through each other's eyes?

The angels through the eyes of the little drummer boy, and the other way around?

I wonder. I wonder how the world might be different today if each had left that night with newfound empathy. What if? What if the Light that came into the world that night illuminated each one's understanding of the lives of the others' around them – their cares and their worries, their hopes and fears and dreams? What if they could see more of what they had in common rather than what separated them? What if each could

fully appreciate the miracle of the incarnation from the worldview of the person next to them?

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This Advent season has provided many of us with that chance, with that gift – the chance to see Christmas through the eyes of the other.

For the second year in the short resurrected life of this old church, some of us participated in a Blue Christmas service to acknowledge and claim before our God that not everything about this season is full of joy and glad tidings. Some came because we are, in some way, “blue.” Others came out of a sense of solidarity for others, to support them in their grief, to extend the strength of their faith to one whose faith may be shaken. That night, we all sought to see this Christmas through the eyes of each other.

A few days later, we all experienced a first – Caldwell’s inaugural La Posada celebration with our brothers and sisters who come from Latino heritage. Either as arm’s length observers learning about that tradition for the first time or as experienced peregrinos (pilgrims), we gathered and walked a long way, seeking room in the inn. We considered what it felt like to be tired and weary, rejected and ostracized. Then we rejoiced and praised God as the doors to our final stop swung open and we heard there was a place for us here. La Posada helped us see through the eyes of those who have come a long way to this country, those for whom a warm welcome can be the greatest gift of all.

That same weekend, we received the extraordinary generosity of our sisters at Caldwell House, our shelter for homeless women on their own. To say thank you to those who had cared for them this year, the ladies gathered their few resources. With a few food stamps here, a few dollars there, they pulled off a modern-day loaves-and-fishes miracle, a feast to fill 75 stomachs more than adequately, and then some. The gravy on everything was their sincere expressions of gratitude, including an original poem. At that wonderful celebration, we saw through the eyes of our homeless neighbors and what it meant to them to give something back.

Then, finally, if we had not been touched by one of these opportunities, we all witnessed the tragedy in Newtown, Conn. At that point, you would have to have a heart of stone not to have a different perspective on this Christmas. The mantle of our national grief still weighs on us. Across our nation, those lives lost, including the shooter and his mother, have brought us face to face with the fragility of our own lives, the value of every day under heaven and our need for each other.

In all these ways it has been a season for seeing Christmas through the eyes of the other.

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So, what do we make of this gift?

In a world that desperately needs more empathy, the birth we celebrate tonight came about to remove our blindness, to help us see things not just through our eyes but to see the world as it is to others.

This night we recall that God did the very same. In Christ, God came into the world to see it through our eyes. This time of year, we sing a hymn that includes these words:

Pleased in flesh with us to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

And with us, with ALL of us, God did dwell. In Christ, God dwelt with the outcast and the oppressed, with the rich and powerful, with the poor and the poor in spirit. With the lonely and the popular. With the sinner and the ones who would be called saints. With the devout and with the bedeviled.

In Christ, God saw things through their eyes. God saw their triumphs and their tragedies, which were not all that different from ours. God saw the best and the worst of humanity.

We needed God to come into the world in a new way two thousand years ago just as we need God to be present with us now. And the amazing thing is this: such a God, who has seen all corners of our lives, knows us all the more intimately and still, by grace, loves us all the more deeply.

So, how might we as God's people be changed by these chances to see Christmas through the eyes of the other? How does the old hymn go?

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, to save a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.

What if? What if after tonight the liberal could see through the eyes of the conservative, and vice versa? What if the rich could see through the eyes of the poor, the white through the eyes of the black or the brown, the Christian through the eyes of the Muslim or the Buddhist or even the Atheist?

How might God work through that kind of expanded empathy to bring humanity together, just as happened around the manger on that first Christmas? How might we become better disciples by gaining just a bit more empathy for another perspective? How might it clarify what we believe and claim as truth? How might we gain even a bit more humility to admit when our way of seeing things is not the only way?

By all accounts, that disparate bunch at that first hodge-podge Christmas left having been changed by what they saw. Each came with one idea about the world and where God was in it. Each saw the same thing, a new-born king of kings. Each returned home to tell others what they had seen and how it had changed them.

Tonight, friends, we receive the same gift as they received. We, too, are invited to behold the one God who came in an infant to see the world through human eyes. He is the same one who saw our best and worst, who died for us and still loves us. He is the same one who calls us to see through the eyes of the other.

But know this: the gift we open tonight should probably come with a warning label. Once we open it, things may look upside down from our normal view, at least at first. But, that is not a bad thing. Once we get used to seeing through the eyes of the other, the world may look more right-side-up than ever before.

So, in the words of the old French carol:

Come to Bethlehem and see,  
Him whose birth the angels sing;  
Come, adore on bended knee  
Christ, the Lord, the newborn king.

Merry Christmas. Amen.