

Pastor Gregory Paul Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/6/2008, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:13-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; ¹¹and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.

In our church office here at Immanuel — in that little household of faith — when Parish Secretary Karen Rombey speaks, I listen! We all do.

Well, earlier this Christmas Season, when Karen heard that I intended to refer to Joseph as the “stepfather” of Jesus, she was troubled and a little bit offended, if I read her right. Certainly she was surprised that I used the word “stepfather.” “What word should I use?” I asked her. And she replied, with her strong faith, “Father. You should call him father.” And then, after the Christmas liturgies, Sr. Elinor Brunngraber reported that Edward Cardinal Egan had referred to Joseph as the “foster father” of Jesus. I guess that’s alright too. Foster father. All things considered, I figure I should return to the traditional designation of Joseph as “Protector of the Holy Family.”

Still, I am growing in appreciation for the role of adoption in the gospel and in the plan of salvation. To me, it sure looks that Joseph adopted Jesus. I figure he did that when he named the child, just as he would have named his own son. I don’t regret the idea that Joseph “adopted” Jesus, or think it somehow unworthy of the Holy Family, because I figure that the highest status any of us can acquire is that we have been “adopted” into God’s family. And so this is a sermon in praise of adoption.

You recall, I am sure, the ancient promise made to Abraham. It concerned the countless stars in the sky. The passage goes thus:

[The LORD] brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” (Gen 15:5, NRS)

Now, imagine that in addition to this great promise, the LORD had also permitted Abraham a vision of those numberless descendents. As many as the stars in the nighttime sky, as innumerable as the grains of sands on the seashore, Abraham is permitted to look ahead and to see that multitude. It would be a glorious sight, no doubt about it, but also I bet it would be a puzzling sight to the man. At first, Abraham’s gaze takes in the vastness of the crowd — its great extent. The crowd stretches on and on. But then his gaze begins to settle in on particular people within the multitude. His vision begins to focus. And soon a question erupts from Abraham: “Who are these people?” I can imagine him asking. “Some of these people — in fact, lots of these people — don’t look like me! Why, look at that fellow. He’s as white as a ghost!” And the Lord answers, “He is from Ireland. Those folk are fair-skinned.” Abraham continues, “And look at that one. She’s reddish. She’s not just tan, she actually glows with a rosy hue.” The LORD explains, “She’s an American Indian.” And Abraham says, “That one is black.” “He’s from Africa.”

And finally Abraham summarizes his complaint: “LORD, you say that these people are my descendents, but they sure do not look

like it. They do not look like me — not like me at all. Are you sure that these are to be *my* descendents? Why, look at those three, riding along there on their camels. I've been a round a bit. I've seen a bit of this world. I do not think those three are my descendents. In fact, I think they are Persians. Persians! Or they are from India or China or somewhere out east. How can they be *my* descendents?"

And the Lord answers Abraham: "Indeed these are your descendents. Some of them are yours by natural descent, some are yours by way of adoption. But they are precious, each and every one of them."

The glory of Epiphany, which we celebrate now, is that the Wise Men journeyed to Jesus and were by no means cast out. They journeyed to him...

...and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And they were by no means turned away.

Thus, the Wise Men serve as the forerunners of Pentecost Sunday, when the whole world commences to come to Christ. The Wise Men teach us that when the Christmas angel announces to the shepherds that "unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord," that dear angel means not just those shepherds in that nighttime field, nor even Israel, the children of Abraham, but the whole of humanity. Each of us is welcome to come to Christ, fall down in adoration, and worship him.

For St. Paul, the great thing about the Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is adoption. It is a strange thing about the man that he does not even mention Mary, the natural mother of our Lord. Surely, Paul knew of Mary, and he confesses that the Son of God was "born of a woman," yet what seems to matter to the apostle is adoption:

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption as children*. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 4:4-7, NRS)

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a *spirit of adoption*. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:14-17, NRS)

And Jesus himself seems to side with Paul in deemphasizing the usual parent-child relationship:

⁴⁶While he yet talked to the people, behold, his mother and his brethren stood without, desiring to speak with him. ⁴⁷Then one said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren stand without, desiring to speak with thee. ⁴⁸But he answered and said unto him that told him, Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? ⁴⁹And he stretched forth his hand toward his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! ⁵⁰For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother. (Matt 12:46-13:1, KJV)

Carol and I have a dear friend who adopted three children from Romania. When the cruel dictator of Romania Nicolae Ceausescu died, on December 25, 1989, the world became aware of the harsh Romanian orphanages, where the babies seemed almost to be warehoused, with little human contact. Our friend then journeyed to Romania and brought home three little children.

When folks back home asked her why she had brought three orphans rather than one, she answered, "Well, if you had visited hell, would you have brought back just one?"

The Wartburg Home in Mt. Vernon, NY, where my wife Carol is Chaplain, was originally founded back in 1866 as an orphanage for the motherless and fatherless children of the Civil War.

Imagine the plight of the orphan. What are the odds that an orphan will be adopted into a loving family? It is the way of things that often the young and beautiful are chosen first. But what if you are a gangly youth, with missing teeth, and you've never been much good at talking. What are your chances in this very important matter?

Well, the good news of the Epiphany Sunday is that in our Father's house, there is plenty of room for *all* orphans. There is even room for those of us who are tall and gangly, with missing teeth and little powers of speech.

Our sins have distorted us, leaving us long and gangly, elongated like the paintings of El Greco. Our sins have missformed us, so that an outsider looking on at us would consider us very unlikely candidates for adoption. And yet, the heart of the triune God is so large and generous that with him, there is room for us. We might have erred, we might have squandered our youth and our opportunities, yet Jesus would love to have us as a brother or as a sister.

You and I, along with the Wise Men of old who journey to Jesus, might originally have been on the outside of God's people. But Epiphany invites us to rejoice in our adoption into the divine family. We might be grafted into the divine family, like a wild branch being grafted into a cultivated branch, but united with the Family we are, and for that we can give thanks to Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.