

“Credo, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, Part Two: **Jesus Christ**”  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for January 5<sup>th</sup> 2020 (Epiphany Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 2: 1-12

....but, of course....

...but, of course, **we** know him not as Joshua or Yeshua but as Jesus...and know his title not as Messiah let alone Mashiach, but as Christ. Jesus. Jesus Christ: a way of naming him which, frankly, owes as much if not more to our Greek and Latin roots as to our Hebraic roots. And therein...

...therein lies a tale although...if you were not here last Sunday or were here last Sunday but are blessed with a short memory, you may—by now—suspect that I have gone stark raving mad. Permit me to take a step backwards and explain!

Last Sunday—Christmas Sunday—I launched us into a second series of reflections on the ancient Christian creed known as The Apostles’ Creed: landing us at the start of that creed’s large second paragraph, the one dealing with Jesus. And I took the opportunity—given that it **was** Christmas Sunday—to celebrate the specific Jewish background without which it can be very hard to understand many of the elements in the Christmas story: including the genealogy with which Matthew, at the start of the New Testament, traces Jesus’ lineage through his father Joseph, right back to King David, and even further back through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah. The Christmas story is a decidedly Jewish story, you see: Jewish elements including his parents Joseph and Mary, as well as—and here we need to turn to Luke’s Gospel—the shepherds who visit him in Bethlehem, the circumcision he receives on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after his birth, and the subsequent presentation and purification said to have taken place in the Jerusalem Temple itself. In short, Matthew and Luke—different though their telling of the Christmas story may be in many particulars—both go to great lengths to stress the link between this opening New Testament story and the Old Testament stories that precede it: in short, going to great lengths to stress the Jewish nature of the story we are about to encounter through their respective Gospels. And yet!

Here we are...8 days later...on what we, at Trinity are celebrating as our **Feast of the Epiphany**: finding ourselves back in Matthew’s Gospel, having traversed the short distance between Matthew’s first and second chapters, only to discover...well: only to discover that Matthew’s highly Jewish genealogy has moved aside to make room for the Magi of the Epiphany. Whether one locates those Magi—those Wise-Men—as part of the Christmas story or, as some historians do, as a separate incident taking place a couple of years after Christ’s birth—that distinction is neither here nor there for my purposes this morning, because—either way—the bottom line is this.

With their entry at the start to Matthew’s 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, what has, so far, been a poignantly told Jewish story is in many ways turned upside down and inside out! We

call them Magi. We call them Wisemen. We call them the Three Kings (although your guess is as good as mine as to how many of them there actually were!). But frankly, given that they arrived at the prompting of a heavenly star, it would be far more honest to hail their arrival as that of the travelling Astrologers...or better still, to label this episode most provocatively: “Here come the Pagans”.

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Here's the thing. When push comes to shove, I suspect we Christians ought to be more up-front about the fact that the Christian movement—in addition to its undeniably Jewish roots—has some pretty impressively pagan roots: roots that are well prefigured in the story of those wandering Astrologers. Were we more willing to own that aspect of our heritage, perhaps we would no longer need to endure—almost without fail—the yearly publication of articles that seek to shock us by drawing parallels between our celebration of such defining Christian feasts as Christmas and Easter...and pagan feasts such as the Roman Saturnalia. Too often we respond in shocked horror at such claims, claims which—in the case of our Puritan forebears—were a factor in causing them, for all intents and purposes, to cancel Christmas in England for over a century, only to be revived thanks to none other than Charles Dickens. With all due respect to the Puritans, they were wrong and Dickens was right. Indeed! The fact that there are parallels between Christian notions and practices and select pagan notions and practices should be no more astonishing than that there are parallels between Christian notions and practices and select Jewish notions and practices. We needn't retreat to our fainting couches...nor—God forbid—need we lose our faith. It is no more surprising that there are Persian, Greek and Roman influences on the thought world that shaped the New Testament, than that Jesus appears to have mainly spoken Aramaic (the primary language of most of his fellow Jews in Galilee and Judaea) and no more surprising than the clear manuscript evidence that Greek is the original language in which the New Testament was written. Given that Jesus was a Galilean Jew, what language was he supposed to have spoken? Swahili? Indonesian? And yes: given that the New Testament was shaped in and by and for a world in which Greek was the lingua franca, in which language would we expect it to have appeared? Klingon?

My point is simply this. Just as we would expect the particularities of the life of Christ...as well as the particularities of a New Testament bearing witness to Christ...to reflect the particularities of the languages he and those around him spoke, we should not be astonished to discover that the **other** cultural influences that shaped him and the early Church should also reflect their local, particular environment. In short: we should not be unsettled by the fact that the Gospel—as it emerged some 20 centuries ago—bears undeniable influences not only from its Jewish background, but from the complex and at times highly fruitful crossroads where—for a brief historical moment—Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures collided and, in a very real sense, collaborated to give us the Gospel and—in our case—make it inevitable that we call him not Mashiach Yeshua...but rather, Jesus Christ!

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The remarkable 20<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran theologian—Paul Tillich—reminds us that there are, within the Greek language, two ways of naming time. One such way—the ordinary way—is through the word *chronos* from which derives the English word chronology: a word that denotes the moment by moment passage of time. The other word—a word emphasized by Tillich—is the word *Kairos*—a word that implies those pregnant times that stand apart from other times: “aha moments”...“moments of opportunity”. Indeed: at the start to Mark’s Gospel, Jesus himself insists that “*the time has been fulfilled*”.<sup>i</sup> Later on, the Apostle Paul—in speaking of the birth of Christ—insists that *when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son...*<sup>ii</sup> And yes! In truth, what I have already described as a “brief historical moment” that produced the story of Jesus, that produced the story that animates the Gospel—this meeting of Greek, Roman and Jewish culture at the crossroads named Jerusalem—that meeting could only have taken place within the rather narrow confines of a few short years. After all: the Romans conquered Judea roughly 63 years before the birth of Jesus and roughly 40 years after his death, the Romans destroyed the city and its Temple. Within the larger scheme of things, that does not represent a large amount of time and yet...

...as the early church was quickly to discover, each of those rich cultures had something significant to contribute to the formation of the Gospel: which brought together the genius of the Jewish religious impulse, with the genius of the Greek philosophic tradition, with the genius of the Roman impulse toward institution building. Minus any one of those three shaping influences, both the Gospel and the Church would look very different: a fact discerned by those early Christian thinkers who recognized (to cite but two examples) in some of the poetry of the Latin poet Virgil, and in much of the philosophy of the Greek giant Plato, figures who in their own way heralded the advent of Christ, though perhaps less directly than Moses and Isaiah heralded Christ. In short: it seems that there was something more than mere coincidence at play, when—in *the fullness of time*—Jesus was born to Joseph and Mary, precisely at that moment in their own Jewish history, when the presence of Greece and Rome would impinge in ways both influential and unavoidable.

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All of that, of course, invites the obvious question: what about all of the other global cultures, then and now? Does the Gospel privilege Jewish, Greek and Roman culture in such a way as to exclude all others? In such a way as to render all others second-rate? Is Christianity—when push comes to shove—nothing more than a Mediterranean religion with a distinct southern European accent: a religion that has nothing to learn from (and, at the end of the day, nothing really to offer) other peoples and other cultures? Or, to borrow the question pointedly asked by the great African theologian and missiologist, Lamin Sanneh: **whose religion is Christianity?**

As Sanneh reminds us in the book bearing that provocative title<sup>iii</sup>, Christianity originally took root not only in the Middle East, but in large parts of north Africa, only to be overshadowed by Islam in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. For that reason, Europe—and eventually Europe’s overseas colonies—became Christianity’s true home for many centuries. But

Sanneh insists that the Gospel can take root—and most certainly has taken root and is taking root—in cultures in every part of the world, insisting that while it is obviously true that the Gospel will impact the culture, it is no less true that each culture will impact the Gospel. Indeed: while I have already insisted that there is nothing coincidental about the “timing” of the Gospel’s emergence; while I will insist that it all occurred when the time had been fulfilled...and that part of the fulfillment involved the cultural background being just right, it also needs to be said that there is no reason for any of the three shaping cultures to give themselves airs! On the contrary. An alternative way of looking at all of this, is to recall that when you take three of humanity’s greatest achievements—Jewish religion, Greek thought, Roman law—shake and stir, what do you get? You get a dying Messiah, hanging on a blood-drenched cross, asking forgiveness for those responsible for his execution...and for the miscarriage of justice that led to his execution.

My point is simply this. The light of Christ...

...the very light that lit the star that led the Magi to his cradle...

...that light is a light which—as John’s Gospel so rightly puts it—is the **true** light that gives light to **everyone**.<sup>iv</sup> And yes: it is a light that illuminates much that is good...but also much that is troubling in each and every human heart, in each and every human culture. Alas, our missionaries—over the centuries—tended chiefly to be aware of that which was broken in the non-Christian cultures they encountered, thereby often overlooking dimensions of those cultures that already softly glowed with the light of Christ. That, of course, is a story for another day. But for this day...

...on this Feast of the Epiphany...this Feast of Illumination....this Feast that marks the opening of the Church’s “season of light”...we are simply reminded that the light of Christ—the light that took flesh in the flesh of the man Jesus some 2000 years ago—is a light that most certainly cannot be hid under a bushel. Mashiach Yeshua. Jesus Christ. The Jesus Christ in whom the Creed invites us to place our trust, comes not merely as a light-bringer, **but as one who embodies the very light he brings**. A light that will ultimately shine on every dimension of human being: the things we would just as soon hide from the light, as well as the things which wonderfully anticipate (often to our surprise and our delight) the life-giving love that is the light...in short: a light that illumines the good, the bad and the ugly of our lives. Bringing the truth of our lives to light....at times painfully so...and yet not with cruel intent, but with the intent of one who seeks our healing...and who knows full well that the things which remain hidden can never be healed. And so, yes:

**That** light! **The** light. The **true** light which *gives light to everyone*...the light which came into the world through this Jesus! **That** *light shines in the darkness...and the darkness has not overcome it*.<sup>v</sup> Never has! Never will! Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>ii</sup> Galatians 4:4

<sup>iii</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003.

<sup>iv</sup> John 1:9

<sup>v</sup> John 1:5