

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany 1-C; 6 January 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster
(rev. 201901030619)

Stranger Danger

In nomine...

I. Intro

Who here has heard the term “stranger danger”? What do we mean by it?

We use the term “stranger danger” to teach our children to beware of people they don’t know who try to talk to them. It’s *not* about teaching them to beware of people they might need to approach for some reason. It’s an important concept but a subtle distinction for a child to make.

But we try so that “stranger danger” doesn’t become an excuse for prejudice instead of safety.

What I’ve noticed in my own life, and seen verified in the studies of security researchers, is that the vast majority of strangers are people of good will. They’re more or less like me: they want good for themselves and they want good for others. They want to think well of themselves and are eager to do a good turn for someone else.

When I’m walking through a strange part of town, it’s the person who walks up to me demanding to know what I’m looking for or what I want that sets off my “stranger danger” alarm. What does he want from me? Why is he paying attention to me?

On the other hand, when I ask a stranger for assistance, choosing whom I will ask and what I will ask them, that is to say, maintaining my own boundaries of comfort and security, I invariably find the other person will strive to be genuinely helpful to me.

So it’s not the stranger who is the danger. It is, instead, the person who willfully violates the boundaries I have put in place to maintain my own personal safety.

Hear what is going on in our Gospel reading today:

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, suddenly some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east² asking, ‘Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.’¹

All of a sudden these strangers show up in town. They didn’t belong there. Jerusalem was a small town: everyone knew these guys were from out of town. Our reading describes them as “wise men from the east.” Some people translate these people as “those who studied the stars” or even “a band of scholars.” They likely came from Persia, what today we call Iran. They were thought to worship the stars, and it is from the Greek word *magi* that we get our modern ideas about *magic*.

These strangers, these magi, walk suddenly into our Bibles at a most unexpected place. Can you imagine young Mary, herself practically still a child, a girl sheltered from the world, faced with these exotic strangers who come to offer her baby son gifts? Stranger danger, indeed!

II. Thesis

But the magi weren’t the strangers in this picture. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. God was the stranger, wholly other and different and alien from us. Unknown. And God could have chosen to violate our boundaries, enter our world with power and sternness like a conquering Persian king ready to take over the world.

But that’s not what God did. Instead, God chose to be born as a baby. God chose to be little and vulnerable. God came into our realm of understanding in the form of a baby boy, asking us to feed him and bathe him and change his diapers. Jesus allowed the young Mary, herself barely of marrying age, to make the mistakes every parent makes. Jesus allowed the neighborhood kids to tease him and the local rabbis to reprimand him because they hadn’t had their coffee that day and were in a bad mood. Jesus even allowed Roman soldiers to crucify him.

¹ *The New Jerusalem Bible*. (1985). (Mt 2:1–2). New York: Doubleday.

Because God did not enter the world to get something from us, to take advantage of us. God became vulnerable and needy – like us – so that we could learn of God’s love first hand through relationship with Jesus.

III. Good News

The Incarnation teaches us that God is not a stranger. God chooses not to be “other.” God pulled down the barrier that would divide the world into *human* and *divine*, into *them* and *us*.

Christianity is not about separating “us” from “them” and keeping them out. It’s not about maintaining an impossible purity, separating ourselves from the world. Christianity is not about exclusivism and fear of contamination. It’s the opposite.

Christianity is meant to be a *strong foundation*, one so strong that we can open wide our arms to embrace others, trusting that God will draw others to reform where reform is needed and that God will use their differences to break up *our own* stuck places, reforming us as well! Christianity is about having a *base* so strong and so trustworthy that we can follow Jesus’ example, asking others for help and building bridges of connection through vulnerability. Christianity is not about building walls for security, but instead about building ramps and elevators for universal access.

IV. Invitation

The Epiphany celebrates the appearance of God to all people: even to strangers from far away who practice an unknown religion and listen to the stars. God is at work in them. And because God holds us safe in God’s own hands, we can afford to see God at work in others, learning more about how God might choose to work in us.

You don’t need to change the world for God. Your call is to change yourself. And as you do that, others will experience that change and be drawn in to follow what they see of God at work in you. May the Epiphany, God’s self-revelation to the world, be born anew in you this season.

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