

Epiphany/New Year's Day/January 1, 2017

Matthew 2:1-12; Matthew 25:31-46;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"The Color of Christmas"

A Happy New Year! to you, and a Merry Christmas! as well, as it is today the 8th day in this season of Christmas, and while we are at it, may I wish you a Blessed Epiphany!, as we are remembering on this Sunday, the Epiphany of Christ, which is celebrated on January 6th. The day we remember the 3 magi, wisemen, or kings, who came from far away, led by a star, and the message of God's universal love and presence, for all, the most precious gift of all. A blessed Epiphany to you.

Last week, the week before Christmas, I overheard just briefly on the radio, something about a discussion about whether or not Santa Claus was white, that is, is Santa Claus Caucasian? Well this caught my attention, partly because I had not heard anything about this yet in the news and partly because I am one who has long been interested in the history of the jolly old elf.

It turns out that in 2013, a woman, Alisha Harris had written an article in *Slate* magazine about her struggles as a child, trying to understand Santa, whom she saw in advertisements and the broader American culture as a white man, but in her own home and community as a black man. This topic was then taken up by Megyn Kelly on Fox News and from there it apparently went viral. Somehow I missed it in 2013.

Of course, while Santa Claus may be real at some level, he is a cultural construction. He has been transformed and molded to the needs of different social and cultural and even economic forces throughout time. The Santa many of us are probably most familiar and most comfortable with is probably that image portrayed first by Hadon Sundblom, illustrator for the Coca-Cola company, in 1931. That big, tall, rotund, jolly Santa, all dressed in red with white trim, and yes, of white racial background. This Santa was a more friendly and thus successful image than were the 2 previous ones Coke had tried. And for 30 years and more, Coke retained that particular image, sinking it deep within our brains, telling us, this is the *real* Santa Claus, as if it were historical reality.

There were of course, other versions of Santa Claus before this. We have the most famous story of Clement Clark Moore, who wrote in 1823, "A Visit from St. Nicolas" (also known as "The Night Before Christmas") of a little man, dressed all in fur, "He had a broad face and a little round belly that shook when he laughed, like a bowl full of jelly. He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf . . ." Sounds a bit like a short Eskimo to me, dressed all in fur. And in 1809, the man known as the father of Santa Claus, Washington Irving wrote of Saint Nicolas, known to the Dutch who settled New York, as that pipe smoking man who delivered gifts to the children from his flying wagon!

Of course, before the Dutch, and before the Protestant Germans, and any other group had their mythical Saint Nick figures, some closely associated to pagan deities, there was, a real, historical figure: Nikolaos of Myra. He was born in the 3rd century in Patara (in what is now Turkey) to Greek parents. While still young, his parents died, leaving him a wealthy inheritance. He gave much money to the poor and fed the hungry. Stories told of his *secret* giving, particularly of his bringing dowry gifts to a poor family of 3 daughters, who without a dowry would have been sold into slavery, where he secretly dropped bags of gold through a window, which ended up in the stockings or shoes that hung there. Besides his generosity to the poor, he was known for his miraculous healings, his love of children, and his concern for sailors and ships. He was made Bishop of Myra and was arrested and imprisoned by Roman Emperor

Diocletian. What is curious concerning his appearance, is that the earliest Russian Orthodox icons depicting Saint Nikolas, show him with *dark* skin. The representation, showing his Mediterranean origins.

I don't know what color Santa is, nor do I know if anyone has ever seen him. I guess we may have to just be satisfied with the presence of his spirit this time of year. As the editorial writer Francis P. Church of the New York Sun wrote to 8 year old Virginia O'Hanlon, "*Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy.*" (*The Sun*, 9/21/1897)

For some, a similar question can be raised about Jesus. Those of us who have lived in a predominantly white, European, American culture, might be accustomed to portrayals of a white skinned Jesus, like so many of the Renaissance era portrayals of him: tall, thin, long flowing fair hair, blue eyes. We know him from artist's renderings, we watch him in the movies (including often, him having a profound British accent), and even in our renderings of the infant Jesus, as in our own baby Jesus figure, blond hair, blue eyes, white skin.

Yet we know that Jesus was born in Palestine, to Jewish parents. He would have probably looked like many Palestinians look today, fairly dark skin, brown eyes, black hair and probably not that tall, by today's standards. So why do we do this? Why do we make him look like us? Perhaps because we think that if he is like us, then maybe we will have an inside connection to him. Maybe if we make him like us, he will accept us as part of his family.

But Jesus made it pretty clear, what is required to be in his family. In Matthew he says: "*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."* (Matt. 12:48-50).

And in the parable we heard today from the end of Matthew's gospel, we hear of those who the Son of Man praises for the good they did to one of the "least of these." They cared for these, not because they looked like the Son of Man, or because they looked like themselves, but because they looked upon these with the eyes of Christ, with love and compassion in their hearts. They lived the universal love of Christ.

And that brings us right back to where we started, with Epiphany. With the celebration of the magi and their gifts, and the message that the Christ child was not only for one people, but for all people, from all places, of all colors, and all races.

There is a little song written back in 1951 by Alfred Burt and Wihla Hutson. Wihla, a friend of the Burt family from church, was asked to write the words to a tune that Al had written. The text came from a conversation that she and Al's wife Anne, who was pregnant, had had. About the purity of the way children embrace the baby Jesus, seeing him as being just like them. This innocent acceptance of a fellow child actually is full of meaning for the rest of us, as children seem to know that God came to be like them, so that they could be like him. Please listen to the words of "*Some Children See Him*" as we contemplate God's wondrous gift to us.