

**The Second Sunday after Christmas  
Holy Comforter Church  
The Rev. John Shields  
January 3, 2010**

**This is not what I want to preach about – but I just cannot resist reflecting on the Jeremiah passage which says, “I will give the priests their fill of fatness...”**

**Speaking for only myself, I can say that today this prophecy has been fulfilled within your hearing. I have had my fill of fatness over the last couple of weeks.**

*“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”*

**What we have in today’s gospel is the account of the so-called wise men and their visitation to see the baby Jesus.**

**Notice that nowhere does it say that these people are kings and it doesn’t even say that there are three – but we all know that there are three don’t we --? ----- What with all the cards and movies and Christmas pageants.**

**Actually, we probably get the notion of three men because there are three gifts: – gold, frankincense and myrrh.**

**I did see a napkin over the holidays which said: Three wise men” you’ve got to be kidding!”**

**I like this gospel for reasons you might not suspect. I like it because it is moving us very quickly out of the romanticized picture (even though the ‘wise me’ are certainly a fixture in our Christmas Card view of Jesus’ birth and early life) into a far more realistic world.**

**What I like about this gospel is that it propels us to see that the infant Jesus – God Incarnate – is not born into a sentimental mural – but rather into the real world of angry, insecure tyrants who will kill children at the drop of a hat if their power is somehow threatened.**

**This makes a case for the incarnation – Jesus – Emanuel – God with us – really with us in a real world of threat and uncertainty – of violence and cruelty.**

**Don't get me wrong – I love the pageants and the glitter and the warm fuzzies of the season, but I know that at best this is just a momentary reprieve from the chaos, mayhem and violence occurring all around our fragile earth.**

**So for me, if this baby Jesus is the savior, the messiah – then he must be the savior of this world, not the picturesque version of it.**

**Now in point of fact – Matthew –the author of today's gospel is trying to do a number of things – he is trying to tell us that Jesus' birth and his subsequent life are events for the entire world – not just the confines of Israel.**

**The 'wise men' represent the world beyond Israel. Matthew is also trying to show Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and he is often seen using Jesus as a sort of new Moses.**

**But the real point of the visit of the magi is the spreading of the light of Christ into the world. And as this story unfolds we see the petty tyrant, Herod, feeling threatened when he hears that there has been a baby born who is to become 'King of the Jews'. So Herod calls in these mystic visitors and wants to know more about this baby – so that he can, "... pay him homage." (Yeah, right!) Herod asked the wise men to come back to him and let him know where the baby is located.**

**After the wise men go to the baby Jesus and leave their gifts – they have a dream wherein they are told not to return to Herod. So they go home by another road. (Perhaps they were the first to use the adult Jesus’ admonition: “Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.)**

**It is interesting to note that dreams play a very critical role in so many of the early narratives concerning the birth of early days of Jesus’ life. Immediately following today’s passage, we will find Joseph having a dream that tells him to take his young family away into Egypt in order to escape Herod’s madness and murder of innocent children. Joseph later has a dream that tells him that it is safe to return.**

**There are so many dreams going on here that it makes me think of the phrase ‘dream team.’ Does God have a dream team of angels at work here?**

**I know the term “dream team” is used a lot in describing sports teams. A dream team is a team with the best players and the best chemistry for winning.**

**I think the term was used in describing the U.S. basketball team that won the Olympic Gold Medal a number of years ago. For several years, it was a label associated with any team on which Michael Jordan played.**

**While that term, ‘dream team’ means having a team that is all you could ever want or, as it were, dream about, it seems to me that we have a different sort of dream team at work this morning in our gospel.**

**In fact I am calling the wise men the original “Dream Team.”**

**God’s dream team (whatever that is) is very busy in Matthew’s gospel.**

**Clearly it is the writer’s intent that the reader would realize that God is communicating through dreams in order that the infant Jesus and his**

**family should not be harmed by the evil intent of Herod or his equally evil son, Archelaus.**

**Aside from the dreams, one of the things I take away from this Gospel is once again the profound sense that ‘The more things change, the more they stay the same.’**

**Here is the Holy Family being uprooted and fleeing a tyrant’s vengeful action: a young family running from the cruel ambitions of a despot.**

**How many thousands, probably even millions of times in human history has this occurred; families fleeing persecution because of the political ambitions or military exploits of an insecure and unscrupulous leader?**

**Fifteen years or so ago, one thinks of the ethnic Albanians fleeing from the violence of Slobodan Milosevic; or 25 years ago, the genocide of Pol Pot in Cambodia, the bloody conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutus in Rwanda --- the on-going crisis in the Sudan, plus all the other countries where religious and ethnic persecution are rampant (including, I am very sad to say, Israel with its systematic displacement of Palestinian families.)**

**In all of these situations, the most helpless victims who generally pay the greatest price are the children. Those who cannot fight back in any way -- - physically, politically or even rhetorically.**

**This event in the life of Jesus gives me an even better feeling for and appreciation of the incarnation. Jesus not only becomes one of us – a human person with our feelings, and weaknesses, but he also suffers the fate of many millions of children over the world --- he becomes a political refugee, his family fleeing to save his life.**

**It is Joseph who, by being attentive to the voice of God in his life, helps to ultimately bring salvation into the world.**

**How Joseph's dreams came to him, I do not know. But is that really important? The idea for action was planted, and Joseph acted.**

**The real question about dreams, it seems to me, is this: Has God's dream team gone out of business?**

**I think not. Many people have responded over the years to the variety of tragedies I have mentioned. Some have dreamed of the possibility of helping the victims in these terrible situations.**

**Some of those dreams have resulted in the creations of organizations that have offered relief and comfort to thousands of children. (Doctors without Borders, Bread for the World, Stop Hunger Now) Some of those dreams have resulted in creation of government policies and programs that have provided care and nutrition to those in need.**

**About a year ago, the New York Times Magazine featured a story of a man named Ron Rivera (not the football player.) This Ron Rivera was a potter—he died in September of 2008 -- Rivera helped invent an inexpensive process for getting the harmful bacteria out of drinking water – his dream was to reduce the number of people who die each year (currently 5 million) because of unclean drinking water. Rivera had no interest in patenting his process –in fact he put it on the Internet so that it could be replicated the world over. Today there are hundreds of micro businesses in the Third World producing these inexpensive ceramic water filters. A dreamer...**

**In our national church, the organization Episcopal Relief and Development is the realization of a number of people's dreams. Did God send those dreams – was God's dream team at work in the creation of Episcopal Relief and Development? Oh, I do believe so.**

**Is it not possible that God's dream team might be speaking to someone at Holy Comforter? Is it not possible that God's dream team is speaking to you? If so, what do you suppose the dream might be?**

**One of the blessings of being in a parish for some years is that you sometimes get to see dreams come true.**

**Some of you may remember back to the time – was it over 30 years ago – when someone (or several someones) must have dreamed that a church should help in feeding the community's hungry people. Boy did that dream ever more come true. From that dream came 18 locations feeding thousands of people.**

**There are many other examples right here at Holy Comforter of God acting because someone dared to dream – or put another way – answered a call – explored an idea – tested a whim --- and something began to happen.**

**Someone had the dream that this church should become a welcoming resource for persons new to our country and community who are Latino, and we now have ESL classes, a bilingual preschool class and a Spanish language worship service.**

**Of course, somebody around here has been dreaming big time --- just look out the back door to your right – yet another dream is coming true. This dream that will enable and enhance the many ministries of this parish, but do not think that God is finished with you yet – I believe that the best is yet to come.**

**In the gospel, God comes to people through dreams, and they act decisively. I, for one, do not think that God has ceased communication with God's people. In that vein then, may you have sweet dreams!**