

God of the Nations

sermon digest

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Isaiah 42:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

carolyn dipboye

She is currently known as Joy Carroll Wallis, an Anglican priest who lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband Jim and their two young sons. You may be familiar with her by another name and in another role. Author of *The Woman behind the Collar*, which tells of her journey in becoming one of the first women ordained in the Anglican church, she is also known for her association with the successful British sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley*. Set in a fictional English village, the storyline of the show revolves around a female vicar appointed to her first parish and the rather distinctive personalities on her parish council. Joy Carroll collaborated extensively with the show's writers and producers and is often affectionately referred to as the Vicar of Dibley.

In a widely distributed Advent sermon entitled "Putting Herod back into Christmas," the real life Joy Carroll Wallis protests efforts to "sanitize Christmas" in the country of her birth and in her adopted country as well. Referencing the release of "Saviour's Day," a Christmas song that reached the top 10 in the British charts in the 1990's, she recalls a review of the song in a pop teen magazine that judged, "This song is OK, but there's no holly, no mistletoe and wine, no presents around the tree, no snow, no Santa, in fact this song hasn't got anything to do with Christmas at all!" More recently she recalls a radio DJ in this country who observed, "What Christmas is all about is the celebration of living in a great nation like this." Christmas, she insists, is "not a celebration of this 'great' nation; it's about Jesus Christ." Allowing the world to reduce our spirituality to nostalgia and sentiment, she insists, threatens not just Christmas, but our very identity as a people of God.

Contrary to those protesting the replacement of "Happy Holidays" for "Merry Christmas," Wallis's concern goes deeper. Sanitizing Christmas, turning it into a warm, harmless trip down memory lane, afflicts not just secular culture, but our churches. The Christmas story itself is wiped clean of any inconvenient truths. We smile affectionately, remembering a warm and cozy nativity scene. "But," Wallis asks, "have you ever spent a night in a barn? Or given birth in a barn?" Worse, have you ever thought about the painful reality that Mary and Joseph were not just turned away from the inn, but from family? In all probability, Joseph would have had relatives or friends of relatives in Bethlehem. In a time and place where inns were very few and very far between, protocol while traveling called for staying with family and friends. The young couple may well have been forced to take the barn because they were shunned. "Family and neighbors," Wallis speculates, were "declaring their moral outrage at the fact that Joseph would show up on their doorsteps with his pregnant girlfriend" [Sojo.net, 12.22.04].

We know, of course, that the birth stories did come last. After he had completed his ministry, after he had died, risen and returned to his father, after the church had begun to proclaim that he was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus' origins became critical. Did he on the order of a Greek god appear on the scene as full blown man? Was his coming an act of God or solely the act of human beings? And perhaps most critically, was he really one of us?

Other than Paul's affirmation that Jesus was "born of a woman" and John's prologue on the Word becoming flesh (*en carnos*), only Matthew and Luke speak to Jesus' birth. The details of their stories are important, not so much as a literal account of an event, but for their witness to the nature and the purpose of the one we call the Christ. Neither becoming lost in a battle over the historic details of their stories nor conveniently dropping the details gets at the heart of the matter. The details chosen to tell the stories bear weighty significance. For sure, they are symbolic; but, as is the case with symbol, we need to plumb their depth of meaning. The birth stories are designed to speak volumes about the realities of human existence and the very nature of a God who chooses to enter that existence in Jesus of Nazareth.

God in Christ knows human suffering and is with us in suffering. Jesus is born, lives and dies as one acquainted with grief. We do Jesus and ourselves and the hurting people of our world a disservice when we seek to turn his coming into a warm, nostalgic Hallmark moment. Unlike the Gospel of John which tends to depict a triumphant Jesus, the first three Gospels are thoroughgoing in the extent to which they present a Jesus who enters a world of real pain. The threat of scandal surrounding Jesus' birth, Luke's story of the manger and the unclean shepherds and Matthew's story of the suffering of the innocents and the sense of fear that grips Herod "and all of Jerusalem with him" foreshadow the reality of one who will be at cross purposes with the principalities and powers of this world and who will finally die at their hands.

Matthew's locating Jesus' birth "in the time of King Herod" is not just for the sake of chronology. The great lengths to which the gospel writer goes to characterize the deceit and evil to which this fearful tyrant was willing to stoop places Jesus in the company of all who suffer at the hands of tyrants of any age. As a matter of fact, far from being misplaced, Herod's fear perceives with accuracy just who this Jesus was and what his mission was. This peasant baby, born as an outcast, homeless refugee, this baby, who would grow up to become an itinerant preacher still lacking a place to lay his head, would be the perfect savior for people of all time and places who are outcasts, refugees, and nobodies. And that, Joy Carroll Wallis observes, is just how the early followers of Jesus are described in Christian scripture time and time again—"not as the best and the brightest - but those who in their weakness become a sign for the world of the wisdom and power of God."

God in Christ calls us to join cause with those who suffer, particularly the poor and oppressed. Epiphany, which traditionally falls twelve days after Christmas, marks the occasion of the wise men following the star to Jesus. The season of Epiphany extends to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent. The season begins with the light of the star and concludes with the light of the transfiguration. This season of light, however, is not about passivity. It is not about basking in the light, languishing in the light or focusing the total sum of the light's rays upon our own remote little island of salvation and bliss. Epiphany is about God's revelation in Christ, but it is not about some far removed light, relevant merely to another world. It is about light that breaks upon us, illuminating everything on our landscapes, extending our landscapes beyond any we have ever known. It illumines our hearts and minds, our relationships,

our community and the entire social order in which we live. In keeping with the full expression of Epiphany, it is a light that calls and sends. It is a light that moves us to identify with the Christ in the outcasts, refugees, and nobodies of this world.

The very embodiment of Isaiah's vision of the nations of the earth coming to God's light, the magi in Matthew's story follow the light to the Christ child and bow there on behalf of all the foreigners, nations and strangers, who might otherwise escape our vision. And so it is that these "outsiders" become insiders, these who are "foreign," "strange" and "different" become our brothers and sisters. These who are "other" become our responsibility from whom we cannot turn away.

And so we care and we fret and we weep and we use our resources of money, time and citizenship to make a difference. The imprisoned monks of Myanmar, the tribal divisions erupting into warfare in Kenya, the repression of freedom in Pakistan, the never-ending genocide in Darfur and the hunger and lack of water, drugs and medical treatment in the Gaza Strip are all a part of our consciousness, a part of the way we say our prayers and go about our lives. Foreigners? Not our concern? Only if we turn our backs on the light that has illumined and extended the landscapes of our very lives. Only if we turn our backs upon the Christ who has come among us.