

January 6, 2019
The Feast of the Epiphany
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Back in October, Pew Research Center released the results of a new poll with an article entitled, “‘New Age’ beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans.”¹ My attention was quickly captured by a figure from the first chart of results: among Christians, 29% believe in reincarnation. This isn't a fringe phenomenon: among mainline Protestants, it's 33%. In case you missed it, here's the problem: reincarnation is officially beyond the pale for every strain of traditional Christianity, because conventional Christian conceptions of the afterlife preclude it. While there are many things about which Christians can legitimately disagree, it's difficult to place reincarnation among them.

The Pew poll actually looked at four “new age” beliefs, assessing the percentage of American adults who:

- Believe spiritual energy can be located in physical things
- Believe in psychics
- Believe in reincarnation
- Believe in astrology

Spiritual energy, psychics, reincarnation, astrology: each of these beliefs lie outside Christian orthodoxy, though different denominations are more or less vehement about it. Nonetheless, a whopping 61% of Christian Americans believe in at least one of them. The figure for all Americans, Christian or not, is 62%. Thus the figures for Christian and non-Christians are probably statistically equivalent.

Pew reported the results by religious affiliation, or lack thereof, as well as by sex, age, education level, race, and political party affiliation. There are other interesting tidbits, which I'll leave to you to explore. But I do want to say this: I think that most people—Christians and non-Christians alike—*perceive* formal Christianity as organized around lengthy rulebooks. The Pew poll is simply the latest evidence that *perception* and *practice* are quite different. People have always been willing to ignore the rulebooks; these days, there are fewer rulebooks to ignore. I suspect that these trends have accelerated, and that people are being more honest about it. For worse but likely for better, most clergy have stopped monitoring the halls, and more Christians are finding their own way.

Speaking of astrology and finding their own way, our Gospel reading today involves some traveling interpreters of the heavens. The Feast of the Epiphany is always January 6, which happens to fall on a Sunday this year. When it's not on a Sunday, our church no longer has a special Epiphany service, so this year is a treat. We get to hear about the “wise men” during worship, and we get to imagine what they might be saying to us.

First a reminder: only two of the four officially approved Gospels include the birth of Jesus, and those two accounts are very different, in some ways irreconcilably so. For example, Luke gives us Mary and shepherds, while Matthew gives us Joseph and magi. Luke and Matthew agree that Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem, but they use different means to get his family from place to place. It's easy to forget all this: the two accounts get mashed up as if they are one. And with the impulse to make Christmas fun and family-friendly, both accounts are "tamed"—reduced in complexity, in subversion, in danger.

There is a whole lot that could be said about that. For example, as to danger, one need simply read a few sentences further in Matthew for a wake-up call. But let's start simply by considering the term "wise men." Our Bible translation diminishes the force of the original Greek, which is more literally translated *magi*, a word for which we have no true equivalent. The magi would *not* have been kings. They *would* have been from a different nation, religion, and culture. Quite possibly they were Persians, and priests of the religion we call Zoroastrianism. They looked to the heavens for guidance, but they weren't astrologers as we understand the term. Like many who lived before the era of modern science, they sought spiritual explanations for natural phenomena.

Let's take a quick look at what Matthew does in just a handful of verses at the beginning of his Gospel. First, he carefully makes Jesus the Hebrew messiah, by setting him in the line of Abraham and David and quoting Jewish scripture. Then, he introduces these religio-socio-cultural strangers. Of course, that's exactly the point; Jesus is the Messiah, *from* the Hebrews and *for* the world. It's strangers who see the star and follow it; who find King Herod and then disobey him; who set in motion the subsequent events, including the summary extermination of small children.

No matter how many years I spend in the Christian life, often I feel like a stranger to it. Where is this Jesus I am looking for? Who is this God I have been promised? Maybe this is just me; maybe it's a not-so-attractive mark of Christianity; maybe it's that human beings by nature are seekers. Regardless, I expect that you also sometimes ask these questions: Why do I feel like a stranger to the Christian life? Where is this Jesus I am looking for? Who is this God I have been promised?

Several years ago, Amazon.com miraculously took me to this incredible purchasing opportunity: an action figure of Jesus surfing. Yes, Jesus is in a crouch, right hand holding the edge of a yellow surfboard, left arm extended forward and fingertips just touching a bright blue wave that sweeps under the board and curls up and over Jesus' head, whitecaps at the tips. His open tunic is swept back, revealing a short wetsuit; his hair remains in place, secured by his crown of thorns. His flesh is oddly pale for someone who, besides being Semitic, spends a lot of time at the beach. According to the product description, the whole scene is about 6 inches high by 6 inches wide by 6 inches deep.

I have been a collector of Christian kitsch since seminary, but I passed on “Surfer Jesus”; he was over the top, even for me. After all these years, I thought of him last week, in preparation for this sermon. So I looked him up, and this generated slight regret. “Surfer Jesus” is no longer generally available. Amazon showed a single one, for sale by a private seller, priced at \$197.89, plus shipping.² I think the original price was around \$15; over the years, my investment then would have far bested the stock market. Over the years, more importantly, maybe Surfer Jesus would have answered all my questions. Frankly, if I thought he could help, I would still gladly spend even \$200 on Surfer Jesus or Soccer Jesus or even Motorcycle Jesus. But I remain doubtful. It will never be that easy.

The thing is, each of us has a unique story, one that is complex, and subversive, and dangerous. When the story of Jesus is tamed, artificial distance is created between his story and ours. To find Jesus, to understand God, we *need* the story in the complete fullness of its complexity, its subversion, and its danger. Exploring those very themes is exactly how we find our places in the story, how we find answers to the hard questions, and how we come to tell our own story. As your most frequent preacher, I hope I occasionally shine a glimmer of light that’s helpful. But in the end, you’re on your own. Luke and Matthew each told the story that they needed to tell. Only you can tell the story that you need to tell.

One Episcopal resource offers this in its definition of “the Epiphany”: “The winter solstice was kept on Jan. 6 at some places during the first centuries of the Christian Era. In *opposition* to pagan festivals, Christians chose this day to celebrate the various manifestations, or ‘epiphanies,’ of Jesus’ divinity. These showings of his divinity included his birth, the coming of the Magi, his baptism, and the Wedding at Cana where he miraculously changed water into wine. The day was called ‘The Feast of Lights.’ Celebration of the Son of God replaced celebration of the sun (emphasis added).”³

What that explanation terms “opposition” I think might always have been better characterized as “conversation.” Much of what we call “new age” is actually pretty “old age.” Over the ages, humans always have been seekers on the path toward meaning. Some have been Christians. In this age, we are among them.

This *day* is our particular celebration of the revealing of the human Jesus as divine. But we shouldn’t just be celebrating. Through God’s grace, God has called *me* and *you* to pursue and proclaim the divinity that *was* born and *is being* born into the world. Pointing toward a newborn baby and his puzzled parents, we do this in the company of a handful of strangers who have looked up at the sky, gotten ridiculous burrs under their camel saddles, and undertaken a dangerous fool’s errand. At least for today, and maybe for longer, may we all strive to be more like them.

Notes

¹ Claire Gecewicz, “‘New Age’ beliefs common among both religious and nonreligious Americans,” October 1, 2018, Pew Research Center, available online at <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/01/new-age-beliefs-common-among-both-religious-and-nonreligious-americans/> (accessed January 4, 2019).

² Surfer Jesus, for sale on Amazon.com, available online at https://www.amazon.com/Jesus-Action-Figure-Surfing-Spirit/dp/B000SB2E3W/ref=sr_1_5?ie=UTF8&qid=1546533646&sr=8-5&keywords=surfing+jesus (accessed January 4, 2019). Here is an image copied from Amazon:



³ “The Epiphany,” from *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/epiphany> (accessed January 4, 2019).