Sunday January 6, 1980

"THE UNORTHODOX CHRIST" Matthew 2:1-12

Today January 6, is traditionally known as the 12th day of Christmas and on the Christian calendar it is known as Epiphany, which means the showing forth. Epiphany commemorates the visit of the Wise Men to the infant Jesus.

Up to this point in the Christmas story the celebration has had a local setting and an entirely Jewish atmosphere. Jesus had been born a Jew in Bethlehem. But now with the visit of the Wise Men from the east, he is shown forth as the Messiah of all peoples and nations. The visitors from the east recognize that a unique event has happened in relation to the creation and all human beings. The Wise men represent the fact that Christ is for all people everywhere.

In that sense, Christ is unorthodox. He does not fit many of the preconceived notions of what the Messiah would be like. A Messiah born in a stable to an unmarried woman? That's not the way important people are expected to enter the world according to our view--very unorthodox!

A young man growing up in Nazareth? No one important had ever come from Nazareth. Very unorthodox! People asked in Jesus' time, "Can there be any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Certainly that town had never been remarkable for anything in the way of religion. It had never produced a great man, a prophet, a spokesman for God. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament at all, which means that it hadn't any notable religious and historical associations. It was just a little country town.

Then after Jesus began his ministry, even John the Baptist who had preached about the coming of the Messiah, and had baptized Jesus, had second thoughts about his unorthodox ways. "Can this be the Christ," asked John. He was so puzzled that he sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Had Jesus answered John, "I am the Messiah," that would not have helped John's doubts. Then John would've asked--"But how can I be certain?"

Rather Jesus answered, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the sick, the blind, lepers, the deaf are made whole; the dead are brought back to life; and the poor, the outcasts are no longer ignored."

Jesus was asking John to consider the quality of his ministry, even though it was unorthodox from John's point of view. It was all help for the helpless, concern for the lonely, love of the outcast and healing for the sick. The love of God became a human being and dwelt among us--that's very unorthodox from our point of view.

Even though we often try to remake Jesus so that he fits our pre-conceived notion of what the Messiah should be--it doesn't work for very long. His economics, from either a capitalist or a socialist perspective are a scandal. His teaching on nonresistance to evil is hard to swallow.

The Messiah dying on a cross like a common criminal--very unorthodox from our usual point of view. We believe the strong are those who fight back. But Jesus taught, "Blessed are the meek."

The love of God became a human being and dwelt among us, but how unorthodox his appearance. He is all love and graciousness, all tolerance; he blesses all who are not against him. His love is inclusive not exclusive. He does not bludgeon us; he calls and draws us to him in full obedience. But as we come closer to Christ, we see again how unorthodox he is.

His burden is not light, because we cannot bear it alone. We want this world, its riches, its power, its pleasure and we want his peace as well.

So we are attracted to this unorthodox Christ and we are also repelled by him and then attracted again, for in the final analysis we have no where else to go. He alone has the works and words of eternal life. He alone can give us the peace which passes all understanding. But like John the Baptist we wonder again and again, "shall we look for another kind of Messiah," and we do.

This morning the unorthodox Christ invites us to his table for a simple meal of bread and wine and in our eating and drinking together promises to be with us in a unique way.