

Preaching from Christmas to Epiphany

Catherine Gunsalus González

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Historical Background:

The Christmas cycle developed later than the Easter cycle, and differs from it in many ways. Above all, the Easter cycle has some clear connection to historical dating. The original events celebrated in Holy Week took place at the Jewish Passover Feast. Scholars may debate the exact year or day of the first Good Friday and Easter, but they do not question the time of year. The situation is quite different with the Christmas sequence. No matter how entrenched in our minds the thought of shepherds in the snow, there is no reason to assume that Jesus was born in winter rather than at any other time of the year. What mattered to the church when it instituted this celebration was that he was born. Docetic views, rampant in the second and third centuries, seriously challenged the real humanity of the Savior. The stress on his birth of a human mother and his consequent development as an infant and child therefore had enormous significance for the church.

Even in the fourth century, when the church began celebrating the birth of Jesus, there was no agreement as to the time to do so. It seemed wise to place this celebration away from the Easter cycle, and winter provided the imagery of light coming into the midst of darkness. In addition, the desire to capture traditional pre-Christian celebrations at the winter solstice also made late December or early January an auspicious time. The Eastern church chose January 6. The Western church chose December 25. Eventually, the church combined the two dates, so that the birth is clearly the focus of December 25 and revelatory elements of the early ministry of Jesus are the emphases of January 6. The East commemorates the visit of the Magi on December 25 while the West does so on January 6. The traditional “Twelve days of Christmas” is the time between these two dates, though, as we shall see, not all the days are in the Christmas season.

A second great difference between the Easter and the Christmas cycles is that Easter is variable in date, but always on a Sunday. Christmas is fixed as a date, however, and therefore can fall on any day of the week. Families have many traditions that center on the home and not on the church, particularly on Christmas Day. Complications occur when Christmas falls on a Sunday. Many congregations are used to Christmas Eve services, and those may be part of a family tradition, regardless of the day of the week. Protestant congregations are usually not accustomed to Christmas Day services, especially not on weekdays, and may carry that pattern over when Christmas is on a Sunday.

When does the Christmas season begin? Christmas Eve. The time before that is Advent and not Christmas. If Christmas is on a Sunday, then Advent includes the four Sundays before that. If Christmas is on a Monday, then Sunday night is the beginning of Christmas. There is always at least one Sunday after Christmas before Epiphany, a Sunday that is not Christmas Day and yet is part of the Christmas season itself. Often the fact that this Sunday is in the Christmas season is lost in the midst of the New Year’s celebration of the secular calendar. When does Christmas end? It is technically an octave, so it includes a full week plus one day. Since Christmas is a fixed date, the

octave always runs from the evening of December 24 to the evening of January 1. If an Advent wreath is being used in the home or in church, then the Christmas candle is lighted Christmas Eve and is lighted every day or every service through January 1. After that, the days lead to Epiphany, and are part of the Christmas cycle, though not of the Christmas season itself.

Many congregations do not celebrate Epiphany, especially when it falls in the middle of the week. The previous Sunday can be used for this celebration, though if there is only one Sunday after Christmas and before Epiphany, that also can create complications. So the preaching occasions to be considered are Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, the Sunday after Christmas, and Epiphany, with a brief look at the two Sundays after Epiphany, since their lections contain material integral to Epiphany itself.

The preacher should consider more than the sermon. The home is the center of many of the traditional celebrations of this season. In this country and many others, gift giving is a part of Christmas. In Latin America and other areas, Epiphany is the season of gifts, particularly to children. The preaching of the season cannot ignore what significance these events outside the congregational context communicate. In fact, the sermon planning should be coordinated with the rest of the program planning for this season. This is not to plan similar themes, but so that the Sunday morning worship can deal with some issues, while others can be part of seasonal program elements.

Issues:

With this as background, let us look at a series of possibilities and concerns that face the preacher who is planning sermons for Christmas through Epiphany.

1. The preacher is aware of the concern for the commercialization of Christmas that the tradition of gift giving has spawned. But there is more the preacher needs to deal with. If the whole emphasis is on gift *giving*, then it is possible to downplay the fact that at Christmas we celebrate the receiving of a gift. God is the giver. Though we may imitate the giving character of God, we should not overlook the fact that we are receivers, not givers. If in this season adults are the givers and children are the receivers, the fact that both children and adults are equally receivers of God's great gift of Jesus can be neglected. It can appear to a child that a Savior, God's great gift, is something that should be outgrown. To be the giver is to be more in charge, more able. To be only a receiver is to be weak, dependent. If children see their parents as the givers—even if this is in imitation of the giving character of God—but do not see them as receivers of God's gift, then what is being communicated to the children is not the fullness of the gospel. All of us are dependent, weak, unable to provide our own salvation. Even what we need in order to live is provided by the Creator. This is true not only of children but of adults as well. Somehow the emphasis on receiving what God has given needs to overshadow our own ability to give, even to our children.

The commercialism of Christmas is therefore not the only problem. It is not a matter of simplifying or even lessening our gift giving. The greater problem is the fact that our giving overshadows our receiving. It is more blessed to give than to receive, but in our culture it is frequently more difficult to be the receiver than the giver of a gift. This is an issue that the sermon can deal with, though it is a bit late on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to do so. At least it is a concern that a pastor should keep in mind

in preparation for the season. Perhaps there could be a workshop or Sunday school class on the celebrations of the season that take place in the home. Many parents of young children would welcome such a discussion as they begin to combine traditions from their separate families of origin and develop their own.

2. The Sunday after Christmas usually creates a clash between the liturgical and the secular calendars. The preacher must choose between dealing with the New Year and the lectionary passages that have to do with Christmas. If there were a tradition of church services on New Year's Eve, then such a conflict could be avoided. Such services are less and less the case in our society, however. It is possible to deal with New Year's in the prayers, and leave the sermon to Christmas. That might be the best solution, unless the text makes possible some combination of the themes of Christmas and the New Year. Again, the issue of how Christians approach the New Year, how families and the congregation can create meaningful traditions, are ideas for Sunday school classes or a workshop. It is not a matter of ignoring the New Year, but of how to avoid interrupting the whole Christmas-Epiphany cycle at one of its most important junctures.

3. The texts surrounding Christmas Eve and Christmas Day center on the narrative of the nativity. This is as it should be. The Christmas celebration demands a rehearsal of the events. The theme of Immanuel, the dramatic entrance of God incarnate into human history is dominant. The Christmas narrative is the announcement of God's astonishing action. The proper response is wonder and gratitude, not detailed analysis. The Sunday after Christmas is an excellent opportunity to deal more theologically with Christology, away from the narrative. How is this birth related to our salvation? Is it only a prelude to the cross and resurrection, or does the incarnation itself have salvific meaning? Such questions are reminiscent of the medieval paintings often used on Christmas cards: the infant Jesus in the manger, with hands outstretched in the position of the crucifixion. The message is clear: we celebrate Christmas only as a prelude to Good Friday. But there is also a long tradition in the church, from the earliest theology, that the incarnation implies a permanent union of God and humanity of great significance in itself. This does not take the place of the work of the cross, but it does mean that there is more to the work of Christ than the cross.

Congregations need to hear deliberate wrestling with the question: Who is Jesus Christ? The Gospel lessons assigned for that Sunday all deal with events in the life of Jesus between his birth and his baptism and therefore continue the narrative. The Epistle lessons, however, are significant Christological statements, particularly the readings in years A and B. It would even be a good time to deal with elements of credal statements related to the incarnation. Of all the Sundays in the church year when didactic sermons are appropriate, the Sunday after Christmas and the Sunday after Easter are the clearest. In both cases, the congregation has celebrated the key events of our faith. Yet celebration and real understanding do not necessarily go hand in hand. After the celebration is a very good time to remind worshippers of what their celebration really implies. Since the theological reflection takes place after the feast, one is not turning the holy day itself into an intellectual event, but reflecting on the holistic celebration that has already occurred. We ought not to assume that because people are active participants in the life of the church they truly understand what the church affirms about Jesus. In a secular, privatistic age, we cannot presuppose such knowledge. Adults are often embarrassed about their lack of understanding, and therefore

hesitate to ask the most basic questions. Preachers often neglect the basics because they assume everyone knows them already. A sermon devoted to Christology would be very helpful in this context, and it would tie in with the Christmas season itself. (In this regard, it would be helpful to look at some of the ancient sermons, such as those of Leo I on the nativity, to see how Christology and the joy of the season can be combined.)

3. There needs to be a clear demarcation between the subseasons in this time period. There has been considerable emphasis in recent years on the difference between Advent and Christmas. Epiphany also has its own character, with elements that belong to it alone.

The term “epiphany” means manifestation or unveiling, seeing what something *really* is, for the first time. The traditional lessons for Epiphany point to three events in the New Testament that show the true significance of this Jesus. His birth points to his humanity, but the humanity also hides the incarnation. This human one is also God, the divine presence in our midst. Though this divinity is hidden, occasionally the veil is lifted and we catch a glimpse of the glory of God. The three events that from very early times have been associated with Epiphany are first, the baptism of Jesus. As John baptized Jesus in the Jordan, the voice from heaven declared that Jesus is God’s beloved. This was a major emphasis in the Eastern church, so much so that January 6 was a day for baptisms. Later the Western church added this to the day’s significance as well.

For the West, the gift giving of the Magi was a dominant theme. Over time, tradition added to the biblical account, so that the number of Magi was fixed at three, complete with names. They became kings. In the medieval West, the three developed appearances to represent the known world: one European, one African, one Mongolian. This occurred after explorations in the late medieval period began to suggest the variety of the human family. Whereas the voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus reveals the significance of Jesus within Israel, the Magi show the significance for the whole world. The Magi are Gentiles, and through the heavenly sign of the star they too are brought to worship one who is significant for them as well as for Israel. The third traditional account used at Epiphany is the wedding at Cana from the Gospel of John. Here the significance of Jesus is revealed to his own disciples: when the water is turned into wine, it is said that “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (John 2:11). If we take the three traditional lessons for Epiphany together, we can see that the circles of those to whom the glory of Jesus is revealed are the disciples (Cana), Israel (the Baptism), and the whole gentile world (the Magi). In the Revised Common Lectionary, all three years use the Magi narrative for January 6, or the Sunday immediately before it. The Sunday after January 6 uses the various Synoptic accounts of the baptism of Jesus. The following Sunday uses various texts from the Gospel of John: the baptism of Jesus and the encounter with some who will become disciples (A), the calling of some of the disciples (B), and the wedding at Cana (C). The theme of “epiphany” or manifestation of who this Jesus really is, maintained throughout these weeks immediately after Christmas, is a great teaching opportunity. Christmas sets the stage, but brief glimpses of who this Jesus is come to different circles of people, beginning with the Magi and ending with the disciples.

4. The lesson on the Magi leads readily into the church’s concern for world

missions, as well as the global character of the church itself. This is not new to the New Testament. The promise to Abraham included benefit to the whole of humanity, and that understanding is in the prophets as well. The sermon can therefore lead into these emphases in the wider life of the church beyond the Sunday morning worship.

5. Because the whole Christmas-Epiphany cycle developed late, whereas the stress on martyrs was earlier, the passage about the Magi has been divided in a strange way. Integral to the story is the “Slaughter of the Innocents.” Even before the Christmas celebrations were created, the Slaughter of the Innocents was commemorated on December 28. Therefore, this consequence of the visit of the Magi occurs nine days before the Magi themselves are brought into the church year. The lesson about the slaughter is now assigned to the Sunday after Christmas in Year A, which makes it even more confusing when one has to choose between those two lessons, if that Sunday is also the Sunday before Epiphany, or one reads them in reverse order of their narrative, if there are two Sundays before Epiphany. The preacher needs to be aware of this, and make a clear decision as to how to maintain the forward movement of the season and not omit significant elements of the narrative.

Conclusion:

The entire Christmas cycle, even beginning the week before Advent with Christ the King Sunday and extending to one or two Sundays beyond Epiphany, needs careful planning. There is no more complicated six- or seven-week span in the whole church year. It is a season with frequent special services, celebrations in the home, the involvement of children in pageants, special schedules for Sunday school, as well as the marking of the secular new year. The whole calendar, from late November through mid-January should be considered as a whole. In terms of Christmas and Epiphany, what needs to be dealt with in the sermons? What does the lectionary for this year provide? Can Sunday school or special events deal with issues of gift giving and family traditions? Where can the theological significance of the incarnation be emphasized? In what ways will our faithful response to God’s gift of a new year be marked? Will there be baptisms planned for the Sunday after Epiphany, which marks Jesus’s own baptism? What is the connection between the baptism of Jesus and our baptism? Will any of these services include communion? The Eucharist at Christmas should have something to do with the season, and not be a sudden switch to Good Friday. What is the connection between incarnation and communion? We can at least say that Christmas shows God’s desire to enter into our world and our history. In the Eucharist, we have the promised presence of the risen Lord who continues to be involved in our history, even the history groups of Christians gathered at the Lord’s Table. As one of us, Jesus presided at that first Supper. As one of us, though now glorified, he continues to be with us at the meal. The decisions made about the sacraments will obviously affect the preaching as well. No matter how large or how small the congregation, no matter how complex or simple the educational program, clear planning for this period of time will set the stage for the whole church year. Used wisely, it can begin to respond to the big questions in the church’s life: Who is Jesus? Why is he important to us? The congregation will then be ready to look at the meaning of following this Jesus, of being disciples, when the year moves on to the Lenten beginning of the Easter cycle. Without this foundation laid at Christmas, our own discipleship will be less significant.