Outsiders bearing gifts

by John Buchanan in the December 26, 2012 issue

Christmas in the United States is such a mammoth economic phenomenon that when it comes to a crashing end on December 25 it feels like a total cultural collapse.

Even though we should know better, churches too experience a post-Christmas letdown. Preachers know that the Sunday after Christmas is one of two "low Sundays" in the year, and they often take the day off. I did this for years, sometimes extending the day into a blessed two-Sunday holiday. So it is helpful to be reminded that for many of the world's Christians, Epiphany is the main event—and that in liturgy, song, food, and gift-giving, Christians mark the arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi.

The Magi are by far the most exotic characters in the Christmas story; they have inspired literature, art and music, from O. Henry's short story "The Gift of the Magi" and T. S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi" to traditional Christmas pageants in churches; from Hollywood-like productions with "live flying angels" to the bathrobe dramas immortalized in Barbara Robinson's classic children's story *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*.

Garrison Keillor, with his amazing understanding of the eccentric realities of the American church, writes about the Magi in *Life among the Lutherans*: "Of all the characters [in the Christmas story], they're the only ones who probably weren't Jewish but rather gentile." Keillor thinks the Magi may have been Lutherans because they brought myrrh, which everyone knows is "a sort of casserole made from hamburger and macaroni." Before they departed on their long journey, says Keillor, the wife of one of the Magi probably said: "Here, take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish."

The late William Placher warned against trivializing and sentimentalizing the Magi. Their part of the larger story is significant. Keillor's observation that the Magi are probably non-Jews is part of that significance. The Gospel of Matthew says they came from the East. That probably meant Persia (Iran), Babylon (Iraq) or Arabia

(Saudi Arabia), nations whose importance to the peace of today's world and in U.S. foreign policy could not be more critical.

The possibility that the Magi were gentiles, and perhaps Arabs, tells us that even here, at the very beginning of the story, Jesus is shattering religious tradition by bringing outsiders inside. Before the story is over, Jesus will shatter boundaries of race, class and gender. And the marginalized—the poor, prostitutes, lepers and Roman centurions—will all be welcome at his table.

The more I ponder the story of Jesus the more convinced I am that it's about a radical inclusivity that threatened and still threatens all who are invested in exclusivity of any kind, but particularly religious exclusivity. Jesus had no time for religion as a definer of tribal boundaries, of who was "in" and who was "out," who was "us" and who was "them." The story still challenges every established religious, political or social structure that's vehemently defended to keep insiders secure and pure and outsiders away.

Those of us who believe the Child of Bethlehem was Word become flesh still have much work to do—challenging and tearing down boundaries and opening windows and doors to all, religiously, socially, economically and politically. All of humanity, and not just members of our own tribe, are the context for our theologizing and moralizing and of our living.

This part of the Christmas story is bracing, bold and potentially radical. After hearing this story, we will be like the wise men who, wrote T. S. Eliot, "returned to our places, these Kingdoms, / But no longer at ease here."