

## Second Sunday after Christmas

January 2, 2011

The Rev. Nathan LeRud

I want to tell you a story about Jean de Brebeuf which is an auspicious name for an auspicious day. He was born in Normandy in France, probably around the year 1600 and became a Jesuit Priest and a missionary to the Huron people, who lived around Georgian Bay in Ontario, in Canada which was then New France. Brebeuf lived among the Huron for about twenty years; he learned their language, he learned their language; he compiled the first Huron dictionary and he's known as Canada's first ethnographer, rather than to try to make the Hurons into little European Christians, Brebeuf sought to translate Christianity into their frame of understanding. So he translated this story that we all know so well – shepherds and wise men and a child wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger in the midst of the Bethlehem plain. Brebeuf translated this story into the landscape with which the Huron people were familiar and the Christmas carol that he wrote in the Huron language for the Huron people in about the year 1640 is possibly the oldest Christian hymn written in North America. It's called the Huron Carol and its beloved of the Canadian people today and we just sang it or a kind of reworked twentieth century romanticized version – pull up your hymnals if you want to take a look at it – it's hymn #114 and I'm gonna read the original twentieth century retranslation – it's a little bit different from what you've got in your hymnals. "Twas in the moon of wintertime when all the birds had fled that Mighty Gitchi Manitou sent Angel Choirs instead; before their light the stars grew dim and wandering hunters heard the hymn. Jesus is Born," -- in Huron "*Jesous Ahatonhia*. Within a lodge of broken bark the tender babe was found, a ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped his beauty round; but as the hunter braves drew nigh, the angel song rang loud and high; Jesus your king is born, *Jeous Ahatonhia*."

If that sounds a little bit like the song of Hiawatha to you, you're not far off. The version of the Huron Carol that we sing today is by a twentieth Century Canadian

journalist and poet and church musician, and it bears only a passing resemblance to the original Huron text that Jean de Brebeuf wrote in 1640. The Huron language died out around the beginning of the twentieth century, and there's one remaining scholar in Canada who speaks it, and has begun to teach it to the small remnant of Huron people that are scattered around reservations in this country and in Canada. And he's retranslated Brebeuf's hymn into a more literal version that comes much closer to de Brebeuf's original text. His translation goes like this:

Have courage, you who are human beings: Jesus is born

Behold, the spirit who enslaves us has fled

Don't listen to it, for it corrupts the spirits of our thoughts

Jesus he is born

They are spirits coming with a message for us; the sky people, they are coming to say rejoice, literally to be on top of life; Mary has given birth, rejoice.

Jesus he is born

Three have left for such a place, who are elders

A star that has just appeared over the horizon leads them there.

He will seize the path, he who leads them there.

Jesus he is born

As they arrived there, where he was born,

The star was at the point of stopping, he was not far past it.

Having found someone for them, he says, "Come this way"

Jesus he is born

Behold, they have arrived there and have seen Jesus

They made his name (praised him) many times, saying “Hurray, he is good in nature.”

They oiled his scalp many times, anointing his head with the oil of the sunflower

Jesus, he is born

They say, “Let us place his name in a position of honour.

Let us show reverence for him for he comes to show us mercy.

It is the will of the spirits that you love us, Jesus,

And we wish that we may be adopted into your family

*Jesous Ahatonhia*; Jesus, he is born

What Jean de Brebeuf is trying to do – and what I think Jesse Middleton, the early twentieth century translator is also trying to do, in a kind of romanticized Tennysonian way to do – is to put this familiar story into a new – and maybe a strange – context. Which is what missionaries, when they’re not tools of violence and empire, are able to do; to translate the story of Christianity into a different context, into a different culture. Gitchi Manitou is kind of a romanticized white person’s version of Native American culture, with the beaver pelts and the rabbit skins and the brave hunters – although, strangely enough, that’s the text that is beloved of First Nations people in Canada today – so there you go. Jean de Brebeuf’s original 1640 hymn text is much more about the three strangers from

afar who follow the star and find the child, and anoint his head with sunflower oil, which is an image that would have made much more sense to the Huron people than offering him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And we, products of an early twenty-first century Western culture that has created its own romanticized picture of the Nativity, have to dig our own way through the cultural baggage that has accumulated around our "we three kings of orient are". So it might be helpful for us to see these familiar images – Belthazar, Melchior and Gaspar with their middle-eastern retinue and their iconic gifts, sitting on camels as they traverse afar across the desert – it might be helpful for us to see that story in the very different context of foreign chieftains and elders who come to the holy child and either present him gifts of fox and beaver pelt, or anoint him with sunflower seed oil. *Jesuoua Ahatonhia* – Jesus he is born.

There are kings in this story, and there are wise men, but not the ones that we think. Nowhere does the biblical story suggest that the magi from the east are kings – that's a western tradition – and nowhere does the original Greek text refer to them as wise men, that's also a western gloss. They're magi, probably sorcerers or astronomers, not the philosopher kings as some of us have come to think of them. And by naming them the wise men and putting these gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in their hands, we've made the story into something that it's not quite. If you've ever seen a reader board around Christmas time that says "Wise Men still seek him" you'll know what I'm talking about. We make a nativity display out of the story – here are the shepherds over here, the poor humble people, and here are the wise men, the rich smart guys, and, oh look, everybody's gathered around the baby Jesus, bowing down to pay him homage. But this is not a story about rich smart guys who find a baby in a stable. There are kings in this story – there's Herod, and there's Jesus. And Matthew plays the two kings off of each other – one tyrannical and obsessed with his own power, the other a helpless baby. And there are wise men in this story, too – Herod's chief priests and scribes, who know the ancient prophecies and are able to point the strangers from the East towards Bethlehem. Those are the wise men in this story. And they

are not held up to us as exemplars – they’re not the ones to whom the child is revealed. They’re the ones who aid and abet the wrong king. Which is very much in the spirit of Matthew’s gospel; this is the gospel in which Jesus will go on to say, as an adult, “I thank you, father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” That’s what I think this story is about – not wise men who use their intelligence to find a baby. It’s about strangers who stumble upon a star and, in all their misguided and naïve foolishness, follow it right to the place where the child is. This is a story about following a wild star into uncharted territory, and making yourself vulnerable. This story puts the insiders right next to the outsiders” the king and the wise men, Herod and his advisors – right up against the infants, the strangers, the foreigners and the naïve. Guess which cast of characters is favored by God, and which ones miss the boat. When we strip away the anger scene versions of this story that we think we know, we uncover a story that can be sometimes a little bit difficult for us to hear: the ones with the power are not the ones to whom God is revealed. God comes to earth for everyone, but the ones who have the least to lose are the ones who get to the manger first.

Which brings me back to Jean de Brebeuf and the Huron People of Canada. The history of Christian missionary work is a long and complicated one, and it’s full of as many violent mis-steps as it is full of holy encounters. And Jean de Brebeuf is no exception – although he was beatified by Rome in 1930, he was no saint. He was a product of his time and his culture as we all are, motivated not by altruistic desire to love the Hurons exactly as he found them, but to convert them – to a large extent, for Brebeuf and his fellow Jesuits, it was a numbers game: how many baptisms can we report to Rome? They were not above using their technology to play mind games with the Huron people, willing to be treated by them as kind of magical strangers from afar – a different kind of magi maybe – with strange powers to heal and to hurt in order to bring them into submission. Throughout his life, Brebeuf struggled with a kind of martyr’s complex; an intense certainty in his beliefs and actions, and a kind of almost narcissistic desire to witness by spilling his own blood. He was cruising for martyrdom. And yet, in spite of all of his failings, there’s something beautiful to me about Brebeuf’s attempt to bring

the story of the Magi, the strangers from the east, into a language and an imagery where it can make sense to a people who are strangers to him. He tells the tale in their terms, and is willing to give up his own understanding of a dearly beloved story in order to see it through their eyes, in a new and fresh and different way. Here's what he wrote to a friend of his who was coming to join him among the Huron:

*“When you come to us we will receive you with open arms into the vilest dwelling imaginable. A mat, or at best a skin, will be your bed and often enough you will not sleep at all because of the vermin that will swarm over you. If you have been a great theologian in France, you will have to be a humble scholar here and taught by an unlearned person, or by children. The Huron tongue will be St. Thomas and Aristotle for you and you will be happy if after a great deal of hard study you are able to stammer out a few words.”*

Jean de Brebeuf was willing to an extent to renounce the power and privilege that his culture and his weapons and his position afforded him, and to live among strangers as an infant, as one unlearned and willing to be taught. Not simply to teach the Hurons about a new religion, but to learn their ways also, and to be taught by them. That's the only position by which he could bring the love of God to life for them. And, as a result, he lost his life. Jean de Brebeuf was captured by warring Iroquois tribes in 1649, and was tortured and killed.

And what he leaves behind is this haunting carol, this image of a familiar story made unfamiliar in a new and different context, which is really I think is what the Feast of the Incarnation – Christmas -- is all about: God coming to live among us as a stranger in our midst, willing to take on our ways and our flesh, eager to be translated into something we can understand and in that process showing us about the nature of power; that it is not found among the wise and the wealthy. God is revealed not to wise men and kings, but to magi; to foreign people with strange ways and unchristian customs who eat strange foods and worship strange gods, and do not know our ways. They anoint the child with sunflower oil when we want to dress him up and put him underneath our Christmas tree like a baby doll. When we come to clean him up, surround him with poinsettias and fir trees

and make him look nice, they come to bow down and worship – they make fools of themselves before this tiny, ugly, crying baby who frightens us because he looks so different, and yet so uncannily familiar. He comes for us, and yet sometimes we have to find a totally foreign and strange way of being – an unexpected star to follow, if you will – in order to get back to the place where we can find him. Sometimes we have to become strangers to ourselves in order to let the infant stranger find us. The paths that have become familiar to us are no longer working, we're at a dead end, and we're asked to strike out into unfamiliar territory and follow a wild star – a star that doesn't go where we expect it to go, that asks us to give up our maps and our guidebooks, and everything we thought we knew, all our accumulated wisdom and to become like little children playing follow the leader, learning a new language, becoming like strangers to ourselves. And then when we find the child, we're asked to do something that comes very difficult to a lot of westerners -- we're asked to bow down and to worship, to put ourselves in the place of vulnerability and awkwardness, to become as strangers bowing down in front of a baby. Oh children of the forest free, the angel song is true; the holy child of earth and heaven is born today for you. Come kneel before the radiant boy who brings you beauty, peace, and joy: Jesus your king is born, Jesus is born,

*Jesous Ahatonhia. Amen.*