

SERMON FOR EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

PREACHED JANUARY 8, 2017 AT ZION LUTHERAN, ENOLA PA

TEXTS: Matthew 2.1-12; Isaiah 60.1-6, Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3.1-12

By now you've probably all taken down your Christmas decorations, including storing away for another year Mary and Joseph, the baby, the manger, the shepherds and the Wise Men. And you are **right** to do so; the 12 days of Christmas **are** over. But I decided to extend the story for just a few extra days and celebrate **Epiphany** today. Epiphany is the day we commemorate the visit of the Magi or Wise Men to the Baby Jesus.

The gospel writer Luke is the one who gives us the **longest** narrative about Jesus' birth. And if we step away from an up-close view of the manger on Jesus' birth night, we get a more **fuller** view of the **real impact** of Jesus' birth, especially as it relates to today's gospel lesson.

Here's how **Luke** describes the **initial** reaction to Jesus' birth. The multitude of **angels** that appeared before the shepherds were praising God and saying: *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"* The **shepherds**, after visiting the Holy Family, *"returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."*

In today's gospel reading from **Matthew**, we find a completely **different** kind of reaction to Jesus' birth. First, there is **Herod**. Let's just say that Herod does not greet the news of a newborn king with **joy** - nor does he search for an appropriate **gift** to present to the messiah. Rather, he is **afraid**. He is **paranoid**. And not just Herod, but *"all Jerusalem with him."* One has to think, "How could they be so afraid of a **baby**?"

But they **are** afraid - King Herod, together with the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem. They are afraid when the **Magi**, a mysterious group of travelers from the east (and we don't know **how many** there were) come to Jerusalem and ask, *"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

Herod immediately makes **inquiries** about the potential rival, and learns that the child was born, *"In Bethlehem of Judea."* So Herod sends the Magi to find this child and to bring back **word** to him *"so that I may also go and pay him homage."* (Yeah, right!)

So, now a bit about these wise men or Magi. Matthew tells us that they came from the east – somewhere east of **Israel**, probably Mesopotamia (or what we now call Iraq). It is significant to note that the wise men were not **Jews**. They weren't part of God's Chosen People. They were **outsiders** – infidels, as

far as the Jews were concerned. But God assigned these outsiders a **significant role** in Jesus' birth story. God put them at center stage in that great drama.

While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were **kings** (and one can certainly contrast **these** kings' response to Jesus' birth from **Herod's**), a more **precise** description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of **Zoroastrianism**, which paid particular attention to the **stars**. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for **astrology**, which was at that time highly regarded as a **science**. So, in short, these Wise Ones from the East were scientists and practiced **other religions**. And yet, God chose them to inform King Herod and the chief priests and scribes that their Messiah had been born.

So the wise men set out and, upon arriving at the house in Bethlehem (and again, it's unclear how long after Jesus' birth this occurred - perhaps up to two years later), were "*overwhelmed with joy.*" They knelt down before Jesus and "*paid him homage.*" Then, as was custom when meeting a king, they "*offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*" These may seem like **unusual** gifts to give to a **child**, but they were certainly **appropriate** ones to give a **king**.

What do we learn from this story?

- **Importance (and reason) for giving gifts:** to show others that we care for them and honor them in our lives.
- **Not to label or judge others** as "outsiders" or unimportant. God reminds us through this story that the people we most **despise** – the people we are most inclined to write off as **expendable** – are **not** expendable to God.
- **God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people.** God announces the birth of the Messiah to **shepherds** through **angels** on Christmas, to **Magi** via a star on Epiphany, and to the **political and religious authorities** of God's own people through **visitors** from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's **reach**, God's **embrace** in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. **Jesus eats** with outcasts and sinners. **Jesus touches** people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the **dead** back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws **all people** to himself as he is **lifted up** on the cross. **In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace.** God's radical grace is wondrously frightening.
- Invites us to ponder what gifts **we** might offer as well. What talents, interests, passions might we see as gifts from God that we now can offer to Jesus by giving them to those all around us and especially to those in need, including the church? Last Sunday as our offertory we sang a verse from Christina Rossetti's haunting hymn, *In The Bleak Mid-Winter*.

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb;

if I were a wise man I would do my part;

yet what I can give him— give my heart.

This epiphany season, may we be as **determined** as the wise men in following all signs that lead to Christ. May we be as **savvy** as **they** became to the **threats** to his life in this world. May we be as willing to pay him **homage** in our lives. We may not be able to **afford** - or **purchase** on Amazon - gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But we **do** have gifts to share - the least of which is our **hearts**. AMEN