

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Baptism of the Lord
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 7, 2018

The Visit of the Magi

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson has long held a special place in the Season of Epiphany—the time when we commemorate the presentation of Christ as “the light of the world.” Listen to these words from Isaiah 60:1-6...

Introduction to Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson from Matthew 2 is not a birth story, per se—that can be found in Chapter 1:18-25. What we hear now is an account of an event that takes place *after* Jesus was born. Wise men from the East have heard of his birth and seek to find and worship him. The good news of Jesus Christ is not just for Israel but for the whole world. Listen to these words from Matthew 2:1-12...

Sermon

The Chrismon tree has been taken out, the poinsettias have gone home, and the Christmas carols have all been sung. The Advent wreath has been removed, and the Christ Candle has been put out and put away. But all is not dark, for Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. And that is the primary theme of Epiphany. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (Jn. 1:5) And that is the reason we have a story to tell to the nations, an announcement to go and tell on the mountain.

The wise men from the East represent the nations of the world coming to worship the revelation of God in flesh—the true light that enlightens every person. Epiphany and the

Sundays after are a time of joyous proclamation, the festival of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ—to all the world.

In order to hear the message of our Gospel text, let us consider three key figures in Matthew’s story. First are the Magi. The Greek word *magoi* suggests that the “wise men” were priestly sages from Persia, who may have been experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. But according to Beverly Gaventa, what distinguishes them here is *their sincere and persistent search* for the baby “born king of the Jews.” You might expect them to be veteran, sophisticated travelers, but what we see is their candor and openness. They seem to anticipate no difficulty in asking Herod the king about the birth of a rival king. But their questions force a troubled Herod to seek help from the chief priests and scribes, who, though aligned with Herod, ironically produce the clue that finally leads the wise men to Bethlehem.

Throughout their journeys, the wise men are *guided by God*. First, a star in the East and then a text from Micah lead them to their goal.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
 who are one of the little clans of Judah,
 from you shall come forth for me
 one who is to rule in Israel,
 whose origin is from of old,
 from ancient days. (5:2)

And when it is time for them to leave Bethlehem, they are warned in a dream to take a different route home to avoid Herod. So the Magi do not just stumble onto the Messiah’s location. They search with purpose and are guided each step of the way by the hand of God.

And their stay in Bethlehem is marked by three things: great joy, worship of the infant Jesus, and the giving of gifts. They come prepared and appear to know what to do when they arrive. The text is specific about the gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—expensive gifts, suitable for a king.

And what undergirds the entire portrait of the Magi—their searching, their guidance, their worship—is its character as the fulfillment of scripture. Isaiah 60: 5 and 6 speak of the time of restoration when,

the wealth of the nations shall come to you....
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

The arrival at Bethlehem of these who are not Jewish turns out to be a part of the divine plan, the fulfillment of promises made long ago, beginning with Abraham’s call to be a blessing to all the nations. The Magi, representative of all outside Israel, have a proper place in the company of those worshiping the infant Messiah. They pave the way for the command the risen Christ will give to the eleven at the end of Matthew’s narrative: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...” (28:19a) The Magi.

The second key figure in the text is Herod the king. The scheming of the troubled and cruel Herod turns out to be no match for the humble Magi, guided by the hand of God. Herod’s plot to have them search out and identify this rival king backfires when they are directed in a dream to go home a different way. If the wise men represent the nations who appropriately worship Jesus, Herod represents the imperial powers, imposing and conspiring, but threatened and ultimately frustrated by “a child who has been born King of the Jews.” The wise men. Herod.

And thirdly, there is the figure of Jesus himself, who in this narrative says and does nothing, but nonetheless is the chief character. The plot revolves around the affirmation that Jesus is King of Israel. The text from the prophet Micah that the chief priests and scribes uncover identifies him as “a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel” (2:6). The Greek verb translated as “shepherd” depicts what shepherds do with their flocks—they tend, protect, guide,

and nurture. Jesus' rule is different from Herod's rule as noted by his gentle guardianship, his compassionate care for his people. But it is this same Shepherd-King who is finally rejected and mocked by the chief priests and scribes who, at the crucifixion, say, "He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now." (27:42). The wise men, Herod, and Jesus—primary characters in this story of the Magi's visit to the newborn child in Bethlehem.

The visit and their worship of the King of the Jews is an important episode in the larger story of God's redemptive plan for humankind. Not only Israelites are part of the story; remember Ruth the Moabite who became a link in the lineage that led to the Messiah. And in the fullness of time, salvation comes through Jesus the Jew, the fulfillment of prophetic dreams, but it reaches far beyond to wise men from the East, and to a Roman centurion, and to a Canaanite woman. And then at the end of the story it is no longer a matter of outsiders coming to Bethlehem, but of Jewish disciples going out to all the nations. In Ephesians 3 Paul says:

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, (8)

And then says Matthew:

...going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (2:11-12)

According to William Barclay, from very early times people have seen a peculiar fitness in the gifts of the wise men. They have seen in each gift something which corresponded to something in the life and death of Jesus.

The first gift is the gift of gold. Seneca said that in Parthia it was the custom that no one could ever approach the king without a gift. And gold, the king of metals, is the fitting gift for the King of all.

As we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, it is appropriate for us to remember that we worship not just a baby Jesus, but the King of kings. Before this King we need to recognize our role as servants. Some people act as though the Christian faith is primarily for getting God to serve us. But the way of Christ is the way of our serving God.

Gold is the gift of our substance. And it is the gift of our best. Many of you have given substantially this past year and enabled the church to accomplish much. Your gifts enable the Word to be proclaimed and the Sacraments to be administered, the school of the church to have quality facilities and materials, and the library to have good books to read. Your gifts provide pastoral care in times of need. Your gifts enable us to support mission work in Anderson County and at the U.S./Mexican border. Your gift of \$880 for the Christmas Joy Offering will be a blessing to servants of the church in facing a difficult challenge, as well as young people seeking an education at our denomination's minority schools. The first gift of the Magi is the gift of gold. A gift fit for a King. A gift of substance. A gift of the best.

Secondly is the gift of frankincense—the gift for a priest. In the temple worship and at the temple sacrifices the sweet perfume of frankincense was used. The function of a priest is to open the way to God for people. The Latin word for *priest* is *pontifex*, which means *bridge-builder*. The priest is one who builds a bridge between God and us. And that is what Jesus did. This Great High Priest opened the way to the presence of God; he made it possible for us to draw near to the heart of God. Gold. Frankincense.

Then the third and final gift of the wise men is the gift of myrrh. Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. In the time of Jesus myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to live for people, and in the end, to die for people. He gave us the gift of his life,

and his death, his body and his blood. And we remember these gifts when we come to the Lord's Table today.

Myrrh can also represent our own sorrow and suffering. This gift of our sorrow and suffering may be the hardest gift to offer Christ. For sorrow can harden a person and lead to bitterness and self-centeredness. But by the grace of God, all of us who labor and are heavy-laden *can* offer our hurt, our grief, our disappointment to Christ, and hard hearts can become hearts of flesh, melted and warmed and made to glow. Myrrh—the gift for one to die, the gift of our inner sorrow.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh—these were the gifts of the wise men to Christ the King. These were the best gifts they could bring. And these gifts of long ago challenge us today to offer our best to this One who is the Light of all the World. To lay our earthly treasures before Christ in gratitude for his love and salvation for all. To remember, to celebrate, to honor.

Now to the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.