



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

Telling Gifts

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2.1-1

January 7, 2018 – Baptism of the Lord

The Rev. Lawrence W. Farris

The Christmas season – what used to be called Christmastide, a lovely word that, alas, has fallen into disuse – ended yesterday, on Epiphany, the sixth of January, the twelfth day of Christmas, that day when we recall this much loved story from Matthew, the visit of the magi to the infant Jesus. My wife Pat and I put away all the decorations and all the Christmas CD's yesterday, and set the tree out back for bird cover during these bitterly cold, but beautiful, winter days. A long time ago, tomorrow was called Plough Monday or Distaff Day, as it marked the day when men returned to field work and women to spinning wool after a break at Christmas. I love Epiphany, but it's always touched with a bit of sobering reality, a bit of sadness, as it marks the end of Christmastide.

Pat and I had a different sort of Christmas this year, and it was splendid. The season of "over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house we go" seems to be passing in our extended family, and so now Nana and Papa - as we are known to our grandchildren - are the ones on the road. We journeyed to Ann Arbor to celebrate with our daughter's family and Pat's siblings. Lots of ice skating and sledding, candlelit worship services, breakfasts with nieces and nephews, and exceptional food were all part of the celebration.

Our daughter worships at the Unitarian Church in Ann Arbor, and there we went on Christmas Eve morning. It's a large congregation overflowing with children and quite recognizable by the wind generator and solar panels outside the building. Where we have our Green P's; they apparently have Green U's.

The service began with a jazz version on piano of the anthem our choir just sang that was at once upbeat and holy. And the service itself was a completely unrehearsed Christmas pageant that was absolutely delightful. As children came into the sanctuary, they were given masks of various animals. A Mary – complete with large beach ball belly beneath a blue robe – and a Joseph were selected from among the youth. As the story unfolded with the standard readings and carols, various adults were summarily drafted into the roles of Caesar Augustus, Wise Ones, and so forth, and given costumes on the fly. Directors shepherded everyone into position at the appropriate moment. The manger scene included not only sheep and cows, but pigs and goats and chickens, and a most enthusiastic camel.

At the outset, one of the ministers gave one of the briefest and most compelling summaries of what the ancient story of Jesus' birth teaches that I have ever heard. She said that in the Christmas story, we learn four truths: that young, single mothers can be superheroes; that looked-down-upon-third-shift workers - in this case, shepherds - are the ones to whom angels come; that undocumented immigrants – in this case, magi - come bringing much needed and unexpected gifts; and finally, that love topples tyrants. I turned to Pat and said, “Yup, that’s it. Little more to be said.” I wish I could say as much in as few words. You probably do, too.

I think many of us know and cherish the story Matthew tells us this day about the visit of the magi, the wise guys from the east. It is so very rich that we turn to it each year as the Christmas season ends. There’s so much that can be said about it – how the magi get to the light of the world by following the light of a star, and so we rejoice that “heaven and nature sing” of the glory of Christ; how they are changed by their encounter with the infant Jesus, so much so that they

recognize they need to go home by “another way.” And so do we, if we truly are grasped by the message of this season. Just as God’s ways are not ours, our ways should no longer be those of the world if we have truly beheld the Christ in Bethlehem’s babe.

And as that Unitarian minister so wisely and succinctly said, love topples tyrants. That is a truth we hope for, long for, pray for, for places all around the world. Read this story closely, and you will note that the power mad and paranoid King Herod is toppled by the birth of Jesus. For after Jesus is born, Herod is never again called “Herod the King”; he is just “Herod”, for the true king has come – our king - the light of the world, the light of our lives, the light we follow from this day forward.

And it all turns on the journey of these three, what? Wise men, kings, magicians, astronomers, astrologers? In spite of their familiarity to us, it's a little hard to tell just who, what and how many these visitors to the infant Jesus are. We assume there are three, not because the text says so, but because that's how many gifts they bestow. They probably weren't kings, because it's unlikely kings would make such a journey. Even wise men may be a bit too complimentary a title, for they certainly don't appear very learned when it comes to sacred writings of the Jews.

They certainly do seem knowledgeable about the stars, though, able both to spot new ones and to interpret what they signify, a combination of astronomy and astrology. But what exactly were they? It's rather hard to tell. My image of them is rather like that of Dumbledore in the Harry Potter books or Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*, complete with dark robes decorated with stars and moons, and probably large and unusual hats.

What we do know about them is that they were not of the Jewish faith. And that's perhaps their greatest significance. Their visit to Jesus, and their welcome by his parents, reveals Jesus is for all people, not just the Jews among whom he was born. The magi/wise men/kings/astrologer/astronomers make clear that Jesus is come for all.

But I think we already know that. We sense their strangeness, their being outsiders, foreigners, immigrants who are welcomed to the stable and thereby make way for other outsiders. Indeed, Jesus' whole ministry was marked by his welcoming those excluded by self-righteous pietism - sinners, Gentiles, tax collectors, women, children, lepers, the poor. Jesus came to bring those outside of communion with God into communion with God. To those to whom the culture said, you're not clean enough, you're not smart enough, you're not old enough, you're not young enough, you're not healthy enough, you're not rich enough, you're not moral enough, you're not pure enough, you're not ideologically rigid enough, you're not religious enough, Jesus said, "Welcome." Welcome to my stable, welcome to my table, to my communion, to my healing touch, to my forgiveness, to my life.

But the magi would teach us other lessons as well. First, they are wise because they know the limits of their wisdom. They are astronomers. They see a new star in the sky, a sign in the natural realm. They recognize it is significant, that it signifies the birth of a king, that it shows the Lord of the universe is up to something. But their expertise is limited to the stars. Although they want to respond to this great celestial, cosmic event, they don't quite know where to go. They are wise, yes. But omniscient, no. They have the humility to ask questions of those who have knowledge in areas in which they are ignorant. Most of us could benefit from more of that kind of wisdom and humility.

And so, they go to the capital city of the Jews, Jerusalem - they'd have a hard time getting their way with the great wall that divides Jerusalem from the East and from Bethlehem - and there they ask where the king of the Jews is to be born. The current king of the Jews, the brutal and ruthless Herod the Great, offers the assistance of his court theologians. And to their knowledge from the natural realm, the wise ones add the revelation of scripture. They learn from the book of Micah that the Messiah will be born in a little out of the way village named Bethlehem. It just happens to be the hometown of another king, of long ago, named David.

How striking it is that those folks in King Herod's court seem to have taken no notice of the star that has so captured the attention of the magi. They do not join natural revelation with scriptural. There are folks like them even unto today who say the Bible has it all - history, science, political ideology, you name it - who never value the truth found in other arenas of God's dominion. The wise ones are wise, in part, because they know to look both to natural and scriptural revelation to learn of God.

In the second place, they are wise because they can distinguish the true king from the false king, the good and just ruler from the power mad tyrant. Herod, builder of monuments, schemer and plotter, liar and murderer even of three of his own sons, has power. People fear him, but they do not love him, nor he them. But Herod is not the one the wise men worship. Neither the stars above nor the words of scripture point to him as the true king. He has power but not goodness. He overpowers rather than empowers. He serves only himself and his minions, and not those whom he rules and whose good he might seek. And all this the magi perceive and having met Herod's utter opposite in a manger rude, they will

turn from his evil to return to their homes by “another way,” a road that does not lead past Herod's palace nor his dungeons.

The Wise ones follow the star unto Bethlehem, and there they find the child who fills them with joy. And they are wise enough to fall down before the child to honor him unlike Herod who will seek only his death. The baby is but a few days old - weak, helpless, dependent - and yet the magi can see that he is the one worthy to be honored. This king does not use his power to compel, but rather to invite. This king does not take whatever he wants, but receives what is offered. This king reigns not through fear and lies, but by inspired faithfulness and love.

They magi are not impressed by raw power or gaudy grandeur. No, they would teach us to reserve our worship for the good and true and beautiful king, even when that king appears as an infant, lowly and holy. The magi call us to look away from all that glitters and awes, to have eyes for stables and mangers, and unrehearsed Christmas pageants, where there is room for God.

Finally, the magi would teach us something about gift giving. They are, in fact, the originators of our custom of Christmas gift giving. The best gifts to receive are those that tell us the giver really gets us, truly knows who we are, what we like, what gift will please us - the kind that makes us say, "it's just exactly what I wanted" whether we knew so beforehand or not. The gifts of the magi are such gifts, and they are three in number.

The first gift is gold, the gift for a king. In that time and culture, gold was given to kings as a tribute to their power and authority. It was the king of metals, and therefore the gift fit for a king. And when this gift is laid, not before Herod, but before the infant Jesus, it tells us who he is - a king. This Jesus, infant though he is, is not the inferior nor the equal of the magi - Jesus is their superior. And

with the gift of gold, they mark him so, not only for themselves, but for us. This the magi know.

The second gift is frankincense. We all know what incense is, those wonderful, fragrance giving sticks or cones. From time out of mind unto now, incense is used by the priests in temples. Priests burn incense as an offering to God, its fragrance pleasing to God and its smoke carrying prayers heavenward. Thus, to be given incense is to be recognized as a priest. And so Jesus is, our great high priest as the letter to the Hebrews puts it. A Latin word for priest is pontifex, which literally means, bridge builder. The priest is the one who on our behalf seeks to bridge the gap between ourselves and God. And surely this is Christ. And this the magi know.

Finally, they give the baby Jesus myrrh. Myrrh was an ointment used to embalm the dead. It is the gift that tells us the recipient is human, and like all humans is going to die. It seems a cruel gift to bestow upon the child. And yet it confers our Lord's identity as the one who not only was born for us, but also as the one who is human, like and with us. Old Nicodemus brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes so that he and Joseph of Arimathea could anoint the broken body of Jesus as they laid him in his tomb. And by this gift, Jesus is marked as the fully human messiah who shares our journey, even unto death and beyond. This the magi know.

Telling gifts, these of gold and frankincense and myrrh, given by immigrant foreigners to teach us truth. They tell us Jesus is the true king, the high priest, the fully human Christ. But how oddly will he fill each of these roles. Jesus will be a king without a palace, nowhere to lay his head, born in borrowed stable, buried in a borrowed tomb. And no golden seat for him whose throne will be a cross. Jesus will be a priest but without a temple, his offering himself, his robes a single

garment without a seam, gambled away at his death. And Jesus the fully human messiah will reveal who God truly is and how God truly works, beyond and beneath all our foolish and selfish projections, born of our longings for control and power, for security and freedom from accountability. Jesus will be the messiah of servanthood and sacrifice in a world sure of his weakness and futility, and despising of both.

But then, after all their journey, these wise ones left. They did not stay. And they do not give perhaps the one gift Christ most wants and needs. As Frederick Buechner puts it,

. . . for all their great wisdom, they overlooked the one gift that the child would have been genuinely pleased to have someday, that was the gift of themselves and their love.

We don't know what happened to the gifts of the magi or to the magi themselves. But we do know this: that this Jesus - king, priest and savior - still longs to receive the gift that every one of us here has to give, the gift of ourselves. Perhaps we can offer that gift anew as come to the table this morning.

It is such a remarkable exchange. God gives us the gift of Christ. We give Christ the gift of ourselves. And thereby we find our lives made full and whole and worthwhile. Let us so receive. Let us so give. And as we walk away from Bethlehem's stable this Epiphany, let us rejoice with Christ at this the Lord's table, where again and always, Christ comes to us and welcomes us, even as at Bethlehem.

Amen +