

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Make no mistake about it, we are still solidly in the Christmas Season which lasts for 12 days as the song says which puts its official end on January 6, which is the Feast of the Epiphany and the celebration of the arrival of the Wise Men from the East. In a number of countries around the world, Epiphany...or Kings Day...is the primary day for exchanging gifts, not Christmas Day on December 25. In our culture, the Feast of the Epiphany has less significance, but it does mark the day that the Christmas season is officially over and we can take down our Christmas decorations. For many of us, the arrival of the Wise Men and their confirmation of Jesus' identity as the infant king of the Jews is all part of the Christmas story, which indeed, it is. However, January 6 rarely falls on a Sunday which would lend itself to our corporate weekly worship. Like All Saints Day, which always falls on November 1, we can and sometimes do, observe the coming of the Magi on the Sunday closest to January 6...so the Feast of the Epiphany can be celebrated any Sunday that falls between January 2 and January 8. We don't always move this feast day celebration, but every now and then it seems important for our corporate worship to focus on the Magi and their significance in the arrival of Jesus into the world. So, that's what we're doing in our worship service this morning.

One of the most challenging, and also delightful parts, of the process of preparing a sermon is the doing the research. There are multiple commentaries on every scripture passage and each commentary provides new insight and sometimes new inspiration for preaching. It's an ongoing learning process...and I fear I will never know enough. I will certainly never know it all. But each new exploration teaches me a little more about what the Spirit wants me to illuminate in a certain set of passages that are part of our lectionary. The Spirit clearly pointed me to two things in today's passages: the importance of the wise men's identification of Jesus as the king of the Jews *and* God's desire that those *outside* the chosen people of Israel should have access to, and knowledge about, the significant arrival of Jesus into the world. Apparently, God doesn't want anyone of his creations to be left out of the salvation process...including those outside of the chosen people of Israel.

As we quickly discover, there is little Biblical information about the three kings from the East that we identify as the wise men. We don't know the exact location in 'the East.'...only that it was territory to the east of Judea. We do know that the kings' primary mode of transportation was the camel which can be found in many locations in the Middle Eastern countries. We do not know their names...which legend has told us are Balthasar, Casper and Melchior. Legend also tells us that Melchior was dark-skinned...perhaps of African descent. The gifts they brought...gold, frankincense, and myrrh...are all

appropriate gifts to be presented to a king and are listed in the Bible passage from Matthew. And it was customary for foreign regimes to send emissaries to greet and give gifts to new kings and rulers. This visit by the magi brings into sharp contrast the conflict between the king of Israel chosen by God and the king of Israel chosen by the Romans. Coincidentally, the story of the coming of the Magi is unique to the gospel of Matthew. It does not appear in any of the other three gospels. So for Matthew, this part of the story of the entry of Jesus into the world was very important.

So if the other gospels don't give us any information about the Magi, what else do we know about them? And what else can we glean about the importance of their visit to the telling of the story about the coming of Jesus into the world? This is the Feast of the Epiphany...so named because the word 'epiphany' translated from the Greek means 'to reveal' or to 'uncover.' We know from the nativity story recorded in Luke, that angels appeared to shepherds tending their flocks during the night and told them about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. They took off immediately to find the baby and they did. The angels had told them that the baby who had been born in Bethlehem was the Savior, Christ the Lord. In a way, the revelation of the angels to the shepherds is part of an Epiphany story. Jesus' true identity and mission on earth had been uncovered and the shepherds had taken it all in.

So why does the arrival of the magi have such an impact? Well, they are outside the people of Israel. They are gentiles, so apparently, God wanted Jesus' identity and mission to be revealed to people outside the Chosen People. Remember, this happens at the beginning of Jesus' life...not after the resurrection when Paul has a conversion experience and he and Peter get into a tug of war about whether or not Jesus is exclusively for the Chosen People of Israel or for all the Gentiles as well. God makes the priorities known at the beginning of Jesus' life by including the Magi in the welcoming committee.

But there's even more to the story of the Magi than that. They weren't 'kings' in the sense of our use of that term. They were astrologers which is why God chose to lead them to the Christ child with a star. The Greek word *magoi*, from whence we get the word 'magi' can be translated as 'wise men' and can also be translated as Zoroastrian priest. That possibility gives us a whole new wrinkle to look at. Here's what I found out about Zoroastrians from the commentary by Niveen Sarras who was quoting S.A. Nigosian's book *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research*.

"They were neither kings nor wise men. Maybe they earned the title wise men because of the skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology...an activity frowned upon in the Torah. They were known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world and is still active in Iran today. It was the official religion of Persia before Islam. The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism is Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a

15-year-old Persian virgin.² Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations.³ He predicts that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded.⁴ Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars.⁵ Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior."

Think for a minute about Matthew's audience. He is crafting his gospel with information about the Zoroastrian priests...the Magi...to assure his audience of Jewish listeners that Jesus is the fulfillment of not only the Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth, but also the Zoroastrian virgin birth prophecies. The Gentile Magi recognize Jesus' divinity and kingship. Matthew presents Jesus as the expected King of the Jews *and* the Gentiles...long before Peter and Paul begin their tug of war over this issue. It is important for Matthew to show his audience that the Magi went to Bethlehem, not to Rome, to look for the King of the Jews, the Messiah. Matthew's audience understood the Persians to be a long-standing religious and political ally with the Israelites against Rome.

The magi paid close attention to the dream world as well as astrology and they were skilled interpreters. They were able to understand and obey God's direction to them in a dream that they should not go back through Jerusalem to see King Herod on their way home, but should return home by a different route. Which they did. They were more open to God's communication than were the scribes who had been able to quote the Old Testament verse from Micah 5:2 which says:

"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."

predicting the coming of a Messiah as an infant born in Bethlehem, but they did not pay any attention to the events going on around them that might have helped them connect the dots and discover just what the Magi had discovered.

We know that God works outside the box. We know that God uses people we would least expect to accomplish His mission and to further His kingdom. We know that God looks for ways to disrupt the human power pyramid that people have created. We know that God continues to be involved in the life of his creation...and in the lives of all the humans he has created. Our job is to pay attention. Our job is to think outside the box. Our job is to be so closely aware of and attuned to God that we can identify God's handiwork when we see it.

Yes. The Magi received a dream and went home by a different route. Isn't that what happens to all of us when we have had an encounter with the living God in the person of Jesus? Once we've seen Jesus...spent time with Jesus...incorporated Jesus into our hearts and into our minds...we can't go back

to following the same path we've always followed. We have to begin our journey back to God by a different route. We see things differently. We react to things differently. Our priorities shift. Once we have met the Christ child, we do not keep plodding along the same old pathways. It is a new day, a new road. T.S. Eliot ended his poem about the magi with this sentence:

“We returned to our places ... but no longer at ease here, in
the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods.”

Jesus does not make our lives easier or more comfortable. The closer we are to Jesus, the more we sense our own dis-ease in this place.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.