***“The Word Dwells in You Richly”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, January 6, 2019

**Colossians 3:12-17**

12 As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.14Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

**Matt 2:1–12**

1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3When King Herod heard this he was frightened. 4Calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was, and . . . 10they were overwhelmed with joy. . . . 11They saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Should I preach on the Colossians text that gives such good advice for loving within a community, or on the Magi passage with its somewhat mysterious background? Well, you know me. I’m going to try to preach on both of them, and tie them together, even if the connection is a bit of a stretch. I hope you’re ready for some stretching, some mental stretching!

Let’s start with the Magi story, which is a bit mysterious to us, but its historical background *can* be unpacked. “Magi” never meant kings. This label sprang up when readers took note of the expensive gifts, and assumed that only kings could afford them. But that’s off-base.

“Magi” is the Persian word for priests. Persian culture had priests from the most ancient times. Then, in the time of the Hebrew prophets, there was a Persian prophet, Zarathushtra, or Zoroaster, who reformed the ancient religion of Persia and proclaimed monotheism. Zoroaster preached about the one creator, the Lord of Wisdom, Ahura Mazda. In his hymns, Zoroaster calls Ahura Mazda “Father of Good Purpose, real Creator of Truth” (*Yasna* 31.8; in Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* [Manchester University Press, 1984], 38). He asks to be instructed by Devotion and Truth (*Yasna* 33:13).

The Zoroastrians who come after the founder write about a coming Messiah-figure whom they call the Saoshyant. They believe the Saoshyant will commence “the renovation of the universe” (*Bundahishn* 30.6; from http://www.avesta.org/mp/bundahis.html#chap30). There would be a resurrection of the dead and a Judgment Day. This was a major religion, and for hundreds of years, “magi” referred to Zoroastrian priests.

Now, by Jesus’ time, there was a lot of blending among Mesopotamian religions, so the term “magi” could refer to various priests, stargazers, or forecasters, with either a close or a distant connection to Zoroastrianism. We don’t know if *our* Magi were Zoroastrians, but their intense anticipation of a special Messianic birth certainly *could* have originated in Zoroastrianism.

But there’s more. Zoroastrians believed the birth of the Saoshyant would be signaled by an astronomic sign. Now, it turns out that there was a rare conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 7 b.c. (see Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [1979], 172–73). Astrology and astronomy were religiously suggestive to people in those days, even to Jews. I think this extraordinary astronomic event is reflected in the story of the Christmas star.

And so the Magi, who were filled with hope for a savior figure, learned that the savior would be born among the Jews, about whom they knew very little. I find it most amazing that these priests who had *non-Jewish* Messianic hopes were somehow alerted to the birth of a *Jewish* Messiah, and that this was the answer to *their* hopes. God helped these priests to realize their Messianic hopes in a culture that was foreign to their own.

I see Jesus as the fulfillment of the highest Zoroastrian *and* the highest Jewish hopes, in fact of the spiritual hopes of all mankind, although most religions had not developed a very spiritual concept. We know that Jesus fulfilled the spiritual ideals and strivings of the Hebrew prophets. I think he also stood for the moral values, the afterlife hopes, and the renovation of the universe for which Zoroastrians yearned. He really meets the spiritual hopes of *humanity*, but not the militaristic or vengeful hopes that many Christians, even some biblical authors, hold. Even his apostles wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village, or lusted for high positions in the government they thought he would inaugurate. Instead, he came to establish the government of God in *human hearts*. He came to reveal Godly character, and to show us that we can, in our small ways, grow a Godly character.

And *that* is the connection I see with the Colossians text—Godly character. Colossians has some of the best teaching on Christian character. The letter to the church at Colossae is said to be co-written by Paul and Timothy. Its moral advice is beautifully given: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility. . . . bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other” (Col 3:12–13). So forgiveness and fellow-feeling are foundational. But that’s just the beginning! “Love binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:14), they say. Have you ever thought of that? Love doesn’t make everyone *alike*, but it helps people to *harmonize*, to sing different notes that yet go together. With love, our differences don’t drive us apart. We *bear with one another*; we have humility and respect. If we have offended each other, we approach one another with honesty and forgiveness, and seek to bind up the broken-hearted, whether ourselves or those whose hearts *we* have broken. We take a long, hard look at our own bad habits, and how they can hurt other people, and we seek to replace them with habits of compassion and sensitivity. That’s how we seek to “*clothe*” ourselves “with love” (3:14). We *put on* this character, practice walking around in it, and grow into it.

But Paul and Timothy aren’t finished with us yet. “Be thankful,” they say; in “*whatever* you do . . . giv[e] thanks to God the Father” (3:15, 17). This is not only a good rule for living in community, it is the key to one’s own peace of mind, even when one is alone. Gratitude is the single greatest key to happiness. Conversely, envy is the key to misery: always resenting that you didn’t win something, didn’t get some girl or guy, weren’t appreciated, didn’t get some job or promotion. No matter who you are, you can always find something to resent, and use it to make yourself miserable. Do the opposite. Learn to appreciate the character growth that you *have* achieved. Learn to be grateful for the people who *do* love you. Learn to appreciate the faith you *have* built up, the spiritual character that God has helped you to develop. It doesn’t matter that it’s just beginning. There is more delight in heaven over one budding character, then over a thousand who’ve been on this path for a while. In reality, we’re *all* budding. We are all spiritual children here, just beginning our long journey home.

Imagine the magi riding home, thinking with amazement how lucky they were to see the child of promise, and how *right* they were to avoid meeting Herod a second time. Their lives must have been permanently changed by these events, although we know nothing about it, despite the Christian fictions that have invented names and biographies for them. What we do know is here is one of the instances where God allowed someone with a load of spiritual hope in their hearts, to get a taste of hope *fullfilled*. The elderly singers in the Temple, Anna and Simeon, also got to meet the Christ child. God *cares* about our spiritual hopes, and seeks to fulfill them—not *every* hope, and not hopes that are corrupted by materialistic thinking. But both of these passages, in their different ways, show us God fulfilling people’s spiritual yearnings.

Paul and Timothy tell us to clothe ourselves with love and trust, to sing spiritual songs, because the word of Christ dwells in us *richly*, enabling us to teach one another in wisdom (Col 3:16). Part of that wisdom is about God trying to meet our deepest spiritual needs. Whatever your secret need is, God tries to find a way to meet it. The hopes of the Jews and of some monotheists in the east had been building up for hundreds of years. God found a way to let them have a taste of fulfillment. God dwells in our hearts, and knows our needs.