### “Hope of the Magi” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 24, 2023

**Titus 2:11–13; 3:5**

11For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. . .

5He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.

**Matthew 2:1–7, 10–11**

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, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling 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. . .

10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they 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.

Welcome to First Church on this last Sunday of Advent, the day before Christmas. We uplift the value of love on this Sunday. The Scripture, however, seems to focus more on a search for truth. We have the wise men who were searching for truth, and whose studies led them to come to Judah to find a new king of the Jews.

Who were the Wise Men, or Magi? “Magi” was an ancient term for Iranian or Persian priests. The great Iranian prophet Zarathushtra brought his message, possibly in the 6th century b.c., reforming Iranian religion. He became the founder of the religion we call Zoroastrianism, because “Zoroaster” is how the Greeks said his name. After his life, most of the Magi became Zoroastrian priests. But the term becomes broader by Jesus’ time, and “Magi” could refer to *any* Eastern priest, seer, or astrologer. It was sometimes applied to Chaldean and other priests from Mesopotamia, so we can’t be sure that our Magi were Zoroastrians, but they *might* have been.

Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic religion, and it has several similarities to Christianity. It teaches of a judgment day, a resurrection of the dead, and a destined “renovation of the universe” (*Bundahishn* 30.25). Zarathushtra is said to have written their oldest Scriptures, the Gathas, which are like psalms. As Christianity has a Trinity, Zoroastrianism has a heptad, a group of seven, the supreme God, Ahura Mazda, and six personalized emanations of him. Zarathushtra mentions some of these emanations—Truth, Dominion, and Good Purpose—when he writes “Let us reverently give an offering, Lord, to Thee and to Truth — all creatures in Thy dominion, whom you have nurtured by good purpose” (*Yasna* 34:3; Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 43). And he mentions Truth, Power, and Good Purpose when he writes, “Bounteous is Truth, and Power with Good Purpose. Lord Mazda created all” (*Yasna* 51:21; Boyce 38).

The Zoroastrians had a very important Messianic concept. They anticipated the coming of a great savior whom they called the Saoshyant, who would defeat the Evil One and lead the renovation of the universe. Some of the prophecies said the birth of the Saoshyant would be accompanied by an astronomic sign. Now, it turns out that there was a very rare conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 7 b.c. (see Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* [1979], 172–73). This may be the origin of the story of the Christmas star, and 7 b.c. may be the actual year of the Lord’s birth.

Perhaps the Magi were seeking the Saoshyant, and *found* him. In the same way that Jesus was the Messiah of the Jews, he may be the Saoshyant of the Zoroastrians, the real fulfillment of *their* spiritual hopes. Jesus fulfilled the higher spiritual hopes of the Jews, without fulfilling every detail in all the Messianic texts, especially the ones with a vengeful or nationalistic bent. In the same way, I think he fulfilled the higher Zoroastrian hopes, without matching up with every detail concerning the Saoshyant. He is the fulfillment of all the higher *spiritual* hopes.

When, later, Acts lists the peoples who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, many of whom were later baptized, the first three groups it names are “Parthians and Medes and Elamites” (Acts 2:9). All these are Iranian peoples, bordering or overlapping with the Persians. These were among the early converts to Christianity. Perhaps the message preserved about that starry night resonated with them?

I pray that *we* be blessed with a leading light in our lives, the way the Magi were blessed with a leading starlight. The Magi were drawn by the light, and by the promise of meeting the new king. We don’t know all the details, but we can be sure that theirs was a *spiritual* hope and a religious motivation. May we also have a hope strong enough to make *us* journey a thousand miles, if need be, as the Magi did. The Magi were just the first of an unending line of Gentiles who would come to revere this spiritual king. “In him the Gentiles shall hope,” Paul says, quoting Isaiah (Rom 15:12; Isa 11:10).

As a king, Jesus has spiritual authority. I think that means both the power of a Creator and of being “the image of God” (2 Cor 4:4), the one who reveals the Father to us. I see Jesus as the Creator and Revealer. There was a Roman centurion who came to Jesus to get his servant healed. The centurion told him that he, Jesus, could just say the word and his servant would be healed. He knew that, as a Roman captain, *he* could issue orders and they would be followed. He assumes Jesus can issue spiritual orders and that *they* will be followed. Thus, he is recognizing Jesus’ spiritual authority. Jesus is so impressed that he says “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9). What was so remarkable about the centurion’s faith is that he recognized an orderly universe, and Jesus’ position as having spiritual authority within that universe.

As the letter to Titus points out (3:5), Jesus saved us not because of our works of righteousness, but out of sheer kindness. He saved us “according to his mercy” (Tit 2:5). He wants us to be “self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2:12–13). Advent season means waiting for the manifestation of God in the form of a little baby.

And if we wait with spiritual hope, that means we love God, and we are willing to receive God’s love into our lives. It means preparing a place in our busy lives for God’s presence. So truth flows into love, in a way. The longing for the true Messiah also means longing for the manifestation of God’s love. I yearn for more of God’s love in my life. I pray that you get a little more of God’s love today and throughout this Christmas season, and then share this love. Enrich the world around you by expressing God’s love for all.