

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

January 6, 2013, The Epiphany of the Lord

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

THE OTHER WISE MAN, BY HENRY VAN DYKE

This morning we are going to jump ahead a bit in the calendar to January 6th, the day of Epiphany.

Each year on January 6th, we in the Christian church celebrate the Magi, or Wisemen, coming to Bethlehem to find the new king, Jesus.

It is a day that reminds us that Jesus came to save the whole world.

He didn't just come to the Jewish people, but to the Magi who had traveled hundreds of miles across the desert to come and worship him.

The word "*Epiphany*" comes from the Greek language and means "*manifestation*".

So Epiphany is also the day we celebrate that God chose to be shown to us in the birth of the baby Jesus.

God put on our human flesh and came to live in our human history and to live our human life.

Today is the day we celebrate "Emmanuel" which means God is with us.

This morning I want to tell you a story written by a Presbyterian Pastor, Henry Van Dyke in the late 1800's, who invites us to think about what it means that we are followers of Jesus. The story is called "The Other Wise Man." It is a story that may be familiar to some of you; it has been one of my favorites since I read it in high school.

Before telling you an abbreviated version of this story I want to tell you some things I learned about Henry Van Dyke this week. (10 November 1852–10 April 1933) He was an English Professor at Princeton University, he was an ambassador to the Netherlands and Luxembourg during World War I, and the author of many books and short stories. He also wrote hymns including the beloved words to the hymn: "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee," that is sung to Bach's Ode to Joy.

He was friends with Helen Keller and officiated at Mark Twain's funeral.

When the Presbyterian Church decided it was time to publish its first book of Presbyterian liturgy, the prayers and responses used in worship, the Rev. Van Dyke chaired the committee that published The Book of Common Worship of 1906.

If you have time over this Christmas Holiday, I encourage you to find a copy of The Other Wiseman online and read the story in its entirety.

In later life Henry Van Dyke was asked how he came up with this story. He replied he didn't know where it came from, it felt like a gift to him, given by God.

He wrote: "The year had been full of sickness and sorrow. Every day brought trouble. Every night was tormented with pain. They are very long—those nights when one lies awake, and hears the laboring heart pumping wearily at its task, and watches for the morning, not knowing whether it will ever dawn...You must face the thought that your work in the world may be almost ended, but you know that it is not nearly finished...Well, it was in one of these long, lonely nights that this story came to me. I had studied and loved the curious tales of the Three Wise Men of the East...But of the Fourth Wise Man I had never heard until that night. Then I saw him distinctly, moving through the shadows in a little circle of light. His face was as clear as the memory of my father's face as I saw it for the last time a few months before. The narrative of his journeyings...ran without a break. Even certain sentences came to me complete and unforgettable, clear-cut like a cameo. All that I had to do was to follow Artaban, *the other wiseman*, step by step, as the tale went on, from the beginning to

the end of his pilgrimage.”

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16291/16291-h/16291-h.htm>

I invite you now to hear Van Dyke’s story, shortened quite a bit so we finish worship before noon:
“The Other Wise Man.”

In ancient Persia lived a man named Artaban. He was a tall man with brilliant eyes. His robe was pure white wool, thrown over a tunic of white silk, and a pointed cap rested on his flowing black hair. His was the dress of the ancient priesthood of the Magi.

One night, there was a brilliant new star in the sky, and he and his friends decided to follow it to find the newborn king it foretold.

They knew from the stars that the new king would be born in Israel, so they got ready to travel to Jerusalem, for that was surely where the new king of the Jews would be found.

Artaban said to his friends: “The King is coming, and I will go to meet him.”

The others went on ahead to prepare the caravan for the journey across the desert, while Artaban sold all his possessions, and purchased three wondrous jewels for the baby king

- a deep blue sapphire, as blue as a fragment of the night sky
- a blood-red ruby, redder than a ray of the sunrise,
- and a pearl, white as the moon, as pure as the peak of a snowy mountain at twilight.

As night fell on the evening they were to meet, Artaban was only three hours from the meeting place. Suddenly, his horse, shied away from a dark object in the road. By the light of the stars, Artaban saw the form of a man lying there, moaning.

Artaban’s heart leaped into his throat. How could he stay here to care for the dying stranger?

By his dress he thought he as one of the remnants of the Hebrew exiles who had returned to Israel after captivity in Babylon hundreds of years before.

The ancestors of the exiles still lived in the land.

But the others would go on without him.

Should he risk the great reward of his faith for the sake of a single deed of human love?

Should he turn aside, if only for a moment, from the following of the star, to give a cup of cold water to a poor perishing Hebrew man?

“God of truth,” he prayed, “direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom, which only you know.”

Then he dismounted and carried the man to a little mound at the foot of a palm tree.

Hour after hour, he labored to comfort and help the stranger.

At last, the man was better enough to be moved to an inn.

To Artaban he whispered, “Now may the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob bless and prosper the journey of the merciful and bring him in peace to his desired haven. But I have nothing to give you in payment for my life, only this – I am a Jew, and our prophets have said that the Messiah whom you seek will be born, not in Jerusalem but in Bethlehem. May the Lord bring you there in safety, because you have had pity on me.”

By the time Artaban reached the oasis that was to be their rendezvous point, the other Magi

had already left. Under a little cairn of broken bricks, he found a parchment that read: "We have waited past the midnight and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert."

His horse was exhausted and he had no supplies. So Artaban was forced to sell the deep blue sapphire to buy camels and provisions, so he could cross the desert by himself.

When he arrived in Bethlehem, he searched the village, talking to all he met, to find out more about the newborn king. He was full of hope, with his ruby and his pearl to offer to the king

A young mother in a cottage told him that there had, indeed, been travelers from the east, but they had left three days before. They had gone to a stable, where a new baby had been born to a couple from up north. They gave the baby their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. "But," the young mother said, rocking her baby in her arms, "Mary, Joseph and the child have gone now, and no one knows where."

Suddenly there came the noise of wild confusion in the streets of the village, and a cry: "The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!"

The young mother's face grew white with terror,
and she grasped her child to her breast, and crouched in the darkest corner of the room.

But Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway. The soldiers came down the street, with bloody hands and dripping swords. As the captain of the guard approached, Artaban said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, and I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace."

The captain stretched out his hand and took the ruby, red as blood. "March on," he ordered his troops. "There is no child here."

Artaban turned to the east and prayed, "God of truth, forgive me. I have lied to save the life of a child. And two of my gifts are gone, in service to people. I have spent for people that which was meant for God. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of my king?"

The mother, weeping with joy said, "Because you have saved the life of my little one,
may the Lord bless you and keep you;
may the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you;
may the Lord look on you with favor and give you peace."

Artaban, the other Wise Man, traveled from country to country, searching for the King. He looked through Egypt where the young family was said to have gone. In Alexandria he met with a Hebrew rabbi who read from the prophet Isaiah that foretold the sufferings of the promised Messiah, the despised and rejected of men, the man of sorrows and acquainted with our grief. The rabbi told him not to look in palaces and places of wealth.

He told Artaban, the light for which the world is waiting is a new light, the glory that shall rise out of the patient and triumphant suffering. And the kingdom which is to be established forever is a new kingdom, the royalty of perfect and unconquerable love.

So, Artaban travelled onward, looking in the places where refugees travelled, looking not among the wealthy, but among the poor.

In all this world of anguish, though he found none to worship, he found many to help.
He fed the sick, clothed the naked, healed the sick, and comforted the captive

And the years went by more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle that flashes back and forth through the loom while the web grows and the invisible pattern is completed.

Thirty-three years passed away, and he was still a pilgrim and a seeker after light. Worn and weary and close to death, but still looking for the King.

He came for one last time to Jerusalem, where he had been many times before. It was the season of Passover; the city was full of strangers. Excitement and agitation flashed through the city.

He met a group of people from his own country, Parthian Jews, who had come up to keep the Passover, and he asked the cause of all the unrest.

“Haven’t you heard?”, they asked. “We are going to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, where there is to an execution. Today two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly. They are crucifying Jesus of Nazareth, who says he is the Son of God and the King of the Jews.”

Artaban’s old heart beat unsteadily. Could this be the same one who born in Bethlehem 33 years before?

“I have come in time to offer my last jewel, the pearl, as a ransom price for the life of the King.”

Just then, a group of soldiers marched down the street, dragging a girl.

She broke away from them and threw herself at Artaban’s feet. “

“Save me,” she cried. “Have pity, I also am a daughter of the true religion which is taught by the Magi. My father was a merchant of Parthia, but he is dead, and I am to be sold as a slave to pay my father’s debts.”

Artaban reached into his cloak and grasped the pearl.

“It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm-grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem—the conflict between the expectation of faith and the impulse of love. Was this his great opportunity or his great temptation?

As he drew out the pearl, it had never looked so beautiful or radiant.

“Child,” he said, handing her the pearl “here is your ransom. It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King.”

As he spoke, a shuddering earthquake rocked the city, and the sky grew dark. The guards fled and Artaban and the girl crouched beneath the wall of the Praetorium.

With the last tremors of the earthquake a heavy tile fell and struck the old man on the temple.

The girl knelt down beside Artaban. As she bent over him, fearing that he was dead, there came a voice through the twilight, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance, in which the notes are clear by the words are lost.

The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no none.

She heard Artaban speaking, but it was not to her that he spoke.

“Not so, my Lord:

When did I see you hungry and feed you?

Or thirsty, and give you something to drink?

When did I see you a stranger and take you in?

Or naked and clothe you?

When did I see you sick or in prison, and come to you?

For 33 years I have looked for you,

but I have never seen your face,

nor have I ministered to you, my King.”

Then the girl heard the voice again, very faintly and as if from far away, and this time she could understand it.

“Truly I say to you, as you have done it unto the least of these, members of my family, you have done it to me.”

Then a calm joy lighted Artaban’s pale face, like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain-peak.

One long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips.

His journey was ended.

His treasures were accepted.

Artaban, the Other Wise Man, had found the King. AMEN