### “Wisdom Made Known” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 9, 2022

**Ephesians 3:7–10**

7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power. 8Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

**Matthew 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, 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. 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. 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Sunday nearest to the oldest Christian holiday, Epiphany. Despite being the oldest holiday, it has some confusion attached to it, since some traditions celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John on Epiphany, while others commemorate the visit of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents. Our reading today stopped just before the innocent children of Bethlehem were slaughtered by the paranoid and violent petty king, Herod. We see his trickiness in his dealings with the Magi, pretending to want to pay homage to the babe king. Fortunately, the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod with a report of their mission, but to go back home by a different route.

Who were the Magi? The Magi were the Persian priests, from ancient times. When the religious reformer, Zarathushtra, came along, most of the Magi became Zoroastrian priests. “Zoroaster” is how the Greeks said his name. The Magi were famous, sometimes for their wisdom, sometimes for being wonder workers and astrologers. By Jesus’ time, the term “Magi” 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 was a monotheistic religion. It taught of a judgment day, a resurrection of the dead, and a destined “renovation of the universe” (*Bundahishn* 30.25). Zarathushtra is believed to have written the Gathas, which are like psalms. Addressing God, whom he calls Ahura Mazda, Zarathushtra writes “with my eyes I perceived Thee to be Father of Good Purpose, real Creator of Truth” (*Yasna* 31.8; Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, 38). Another passages says, “Lord Mazda created all” (*Yasna* 51.21; Boyce, 43). The Zoroastrians had a very important concept that we would call Messianic. They anticipated the coming of a great savior whom they called the Saoshyant, who would defeat the devil 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 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 that 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 Messianic texts, especially 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.

When Acts lists the peoples who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, 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.

May 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. May we have a hope strong enough to make *us* journey a thousand miles, 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. There was a Roman centurion who came to him to get his servant healed. He told Jesus that he, Jesus, could just say the word and the 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 that Jesus had spiritual authority within the universe.

The authority and power of Jesus were made known throughout his ministry, but he never used them in self-defense, nor did he use them to overwhelm people and frighten them into believing him. He used only the power of persuasion, reasoning, and love. That principle can even be found in the Old Testament, in the prophet Zechariah: “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (4:6). This was always Jesus’ method. Nevertheless, people could be highly impressed by the power of his teaching. “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). We can still sense this, thousands of years later, reading his parables and lessons. He had persuasive authority. Do you remember any of your teachers? Do you remember one who was a remarkably good teacher? Who had a power that he or she didn’t need to insist on, but which came naturally? You remember the really good teacher.

The two disciples on the road to Emmaus were impressed by the risen Jesus, who taught them, but whom they did not recognize. They commented, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). Let his words burn within you, as when he said “nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known” (Matt 10:26). No hidden crime will remain hidden. And no secret act of kindness will remain unknown.

The authority of Jesus shows up in Ephesians, as well. The author was sent to proclaim “the news of the boundless riches of Christ” to the Gentiles, and to reveal “the mystery hidden for ages in God” (3:8–9). Christ’s life, death, and resurrection *was* that mystery. God wanted to send a message to the rebellious authorities in heavenly places, “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (3:10). That these rulers are heavenly figures is proved by the statement at the end of Ephesians, where it says “our struggle is . . . against the rulers . . . against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). These rulers and authorities, who rebelled against God’s Son, needed to be shown that the Son has legitimate authority. *That* is what is “made known to the rulers.” Christ has been seated at the right hand of God, Ephesians says, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (1:21). He is above all the heavenly authorities and angels. And now he has the power to “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10), gathering up all spiritual accomplishments, preserving all goodness, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). May we make God be all in all in *our* lives, as we await the day when God will be all in all in the universe.