

Bearing Gifts....and Offerings

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

January 6, 2008

O *God, who by a star guided the wise men to the worship of your Son; we pray you to lead to yourself the wise and the great of every land, that unto you every knee may bow, and every thought be brought into captivity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

January 6, the twelfth day after Christmas, is the day of Epiphany. Epiphany is the climax of the Advent-Christmas Season and on this day when we read the story of the wise men who come seeking the new born king. The term *epiphany* means "to show" or "to make known." And so, the wise men "make known" to the world that Jesus is Lord and King.

The visit of the wise men has always been a popular Christmas story. Three Kings come from the East following a star. After a long journey, they come to the royal palace and tell the current King that a new King is coming. Talk about reign change, this is a classic case of how not to conduct foreign policy. Their arrival in Jerusalem triggers King Herod's paranoia and sets off a chain of events with tragic consequences.

The wise men, however, are somewhat oblivious to all this. They find the child and pay their tribute to him, and when their place in this divine drama is over, they return to their home, singing, "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

It does make you wonder, however, how the story might be different if we had three wise women, instead of men. First, they would have stopped along the way and asked for directions. They would have arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned up the stable, made a casserole, and brought some practical gifts, (I am sure some disposable dippers would have been helpful.) And most of all, there would have been peace on earth.

Now, if you listened closely to the reading of the text this morning, you would have noticed that the story is a little different than we thought. First off, these were not kings. They were wise men or magi – magi is the Greek word for *wise men*. Magi were priests from Persia who were teachers among the royal classes. They were scientists and philosophers who were sincere seekers of truth. An ancient teacher of science would above all be an expert in the stars. If a spectacular phenomenon appeared in the heavens, it was seen as a sign that God was breaking into the natural order and bringing something new.¹ And so they studied the stars.

Matthew never tells us that there were three wise men. The number three came about centuries later when some thoughtful medieval scholar counted up the gifts and surmised that there must have been three people who brought

them. Notice also, that there were no shepherds around when the wise men paid their call. The visit took place some time after the birth of Jesus, perhaps as long as two years. This helps explain why King Herod issued the order for all the male children in Bethlehem two years old or younger to be killed. And the wise men came to a house, not the stable, to visit the child, not the baby.

But one thing the popular rendering of the story did get right. The wise men brought gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Each of these gifts has symbolic meaning. Gold was the gift for a King. Frankincense was a very expensive, sweet perfume, used by priests in the duties in the temple. Both of these gifts were mentioned in the reading from Isaiah, signifying the gifts the world would bring to Israel's God. The gift of myrrh had a very different quality to it. It was used to anoint the dead. In the recent Hollywood produced movie, *The Nativity*, it was interesting to see the concern etched on the face of the magi who, with trembling hands and voice, offered the gift of myrrh to the child. "It is for the sorrow" that was to come, he told Mary.

Throughout the history of the people of God, worshippers brought gifts to the house of the Lord, be it to the pillars of rock in the desert set up by the patriarchs marking the place where there had been a divine encounter with their God, or

when the Israelites were in the wilderness, in the tabernacle where the presence of the Lord was thought to abide. Later, after the nation has been established, the people brought their tithes to the Temple in Jerusalem. And later still, the Christian community brought their gifts to the church. It was from these gifts that the temple, the synagogue, and the church were able to carry out the Lord's work in that context.

As this congregation moves forward in the New Year we continue to find our finances lagging behind the work we would like to do. So far, we have received 219 pledges to support the ministry of this church in the coming year. However, we have about 20 people who pledged last year who have not done so this year. We are not quite sure how to explain that. Without those pledges, we will have to downsize our staff or make significant cuts in our mission. We don't want to do either one of these things, but they represent the only flexibility we have in our budget.

In the spirit of the wise men who brought gifts to the Christ child, I would like to ask you to consider, or even reconsider, your gift to God's work in this congregation. In each of the pews, there is a pledge card for this year's campaign. We need 50 more pledges for the coming year. Our average pledge is \$2400 a year. That is a wonderful and generous figure, an increase from last year. If we were to get these 50 new pledges for even one-quarter of our average pledge, which would be \$50 a month, we would be able to start moving forward as a

congregation rather than cutting back in our ministry.

"Arise, shine," the prophet Isaiah said, "For your light has come." This is the spirit of Epiphany, working to make Christ known throughout our community. It is the gifts you bring to the Christ child that makes that goal possible.

ⁱ Myron S. Augsburger, *The Communicator's Commentary: Matthew*, (Word, 1983), 33

**This sermon delivered by
Rev. Kent Winters-Hazelton
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS 66047**