

The Bethel Pulpit

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On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: Where is Jesus?

And so....we are now face to face with the three wise men. We hear again the story of the magi; their gifts to the baby - gold... for his kingliness, frankincense... for his priesthood..... to mediate a way between God and humankind; and, myrrh... for his burial. But what did these "wise guys" know anyway? And how did they know it? Because it is important to give a gift that fits the recipient, isn't it? Who IS Jesus, anyway?

Then there was: the wedding at Cana, his baptism in the Jordan, that moment with Peter, James and John atop Mt. Horeb, where with the audience of Moses and Elijah he was transfigured, his last supper with his friends, his death on the cross. There was his resurrection, his ascension and the sending of his Spirit. In the "trade," these are all "epiphany" stories. An epiphany is an appearance, a manifestation, a demonstration... intended to help us learn of Jesus' real presence in the world. These stories are meant to get our attention, to hook us, to draw us in.

In today's story of the magi, the 'hook' is the star. On the Mt. of Transfiguration it was the cloud and the voice, as in Jesus baptism. In the wedding at Cana it was the wine. These 'hooks' are signs designed to lead us to discover where Jesus is, who Jesus is, and what Jesus does. Just a few days ago some of us again saw our wonderful children tell the Christmas story. We saw angels, kings and queens of various ages. While tradition says there were three magi, they were men, and kings, astrologers, professors or wizards; it is truly irrelevant who they were, how many there were, or what they looked like. The one thing about them that has remained consistent over the centuries is that they have brought the question: "Where is he that is born king of the Jews?" No, on this Sunday of the Kings, not much about them really matters except that they asked the question, "Where is He?"

Matthew is not the first one to imagine these three rich wise guys from the East coming to Jerusalem. His story line and plot come from Isaiah 60, a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 580 B.C.E. These Jews had been in exile in Iraq for a couple generations and had come back to the bombed-out city of Jerusalem. They were in despair. Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed, and nobody knows

what to do about it?

In the middle of the mess, an amazing poet invites his depressed, discouraged contemporaries to look up, to hope and to expect everything to change. "Rise, **Shine**, for your light has come." Isaiah anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...." Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration. God has promised to make the city work effectively in peace, and a promise from God is very sure.

Like Matthew, the wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem to take rare spices, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Most of all, they know that they will find a new king of all peace and prosperity. But when Herod, the incumbent ruler, hears of these plans, he is frightened. A new king is a threat to the old king and the old order.

Then a strange thing happens. Herod hurriedly arranges a closed-door executive session with the leading Old Testament scholars, and says to them: "**Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?**" The scholars tell him: You have the wrong text. And the wise men outside the window are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. It suggests Jerusalem will become great again! In that scenario, the urban elites can recover their former power and nothing will really change.

Herod does not like that verdict and asks defiantly, "Well, do you have a better text?" The scholars are afraid of the angry king but tell him with much trepidation, that the right text is **Micah5:2-4**. "**But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, you are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.**"

Here is the voice of hope from a peasant of old. A voice not impressed with high towers, great arenas, banks or urban achievement. It points to a very different

future... to a peasant land that will organize in resistance to the imperial power known. **Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground.** And isn't it interesting how the theme of this paradigm shift cannot be too far from the mouths of our very own American political leaders whoever they are and when and wherever they debate the issues of our day?

So, we have to credit Herod with "getting the picture" and knowing that this was serious. It was Micah who had delivered the keynote speech in the days of Kings Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah. **And we have to credit the Magi for knowing what was in the picture; what they were looking for; and whom they were seeking. It was a king with transforming and transcending power whom they sought.** They recognized that the one they sought was a King with whom the world would have to reckon. When one king pays homage to another, it is the most ultimate kind of homage. "On entering the house" Matthew writes, "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." **They understood in their worldly wisdom that here was one who, in the apparent weakness and simplicity of infancy, would make a difference in the world. THEY UNDERSTOOD THAT.**

In the centuries since, we too have sought to pay homage. We have sought to say "Jesus is Lord" and to believe it and to do what homage requires. **When we say that "Jesus is Lord", as the early Christians did, we mean that neither anyone nor anything else can claim more of our loyalty or our love than he can.** When and where Jesus is Lord, he is superior to the claims of one's own family. When Jesus and where is Lord, one leaves one's mother and one's father and acknowledges one priority, which is that Jesus is Lord. When and where Jesus is Lord, he is superior to the claims of the nation, the state, or any social organization. When and where Jesus is Lord, he trumps the claims of race, class, economic status and gender. When and where Jesus is Lord, he is superior even to the tyranny of time. And so on Christ the King Sunday we sing: ***Crown Him the Lord of Years, the Potentate of Time; Creator of the rolling spheres, ineffably sublime, All hail, redeemer hail!***

Those three words, affirmed by the magi, become the first, the best, and the last words for all believers. Who is Jesus? Jesus is Lord; and as long as there are people in the world who, in the worst of times and under the most dangerous of circumstances, yet declare that Jesus is Lord, this world and all of its powers will NEVER have the last word. Yes, Christmas has come, and now just yesterday, the twelfth day, has come and gone, and its time to pack

up the mangers, pull down the greens, and get back to "normal." Those are the normal, natural instincts of people like ourselves...who prefer reality to miracles. The Epiphany Miracle, however, which lasts well beyond the season of its name, is that Jesus' real presence IS OUR REALITY. THAT is HIS astonishing claim, and ours. **He has come into the world to find us as, and where, we are. Therefore, like those wise folks from the East, let us too look for him as, and where, he is; for where he is, we will wish to be.**

We will know the power of his real presence in places where we would least expect to find him. We will celebrate his real presence in that most unlikely place of birth, the manger. We will celebrate his real presence in that most unlikely of social settings - a wedding. We will celebrate his real presence in that most painful of places, the cross. We will celebrate his real presence in that darkest of places, the grave. We will celebrate his real presence in those most unusual of creatures of bread and wine; and we will celebrate his real presence in the past, the present, and now the future.

There is NO PLACE **we need fear to go that the real and transforming presence of Jesus has not already been**, and is not already there. That is the REAL Presence. **You can depend on it!** For you. PRAISE GOD!