

Epiphany, Yr. C

January 6, 2019

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

Sometimes it's a struggle to see how the scriptures for a given Sunday are connected. Not so on Epiphany, because today the connections are obvious. Isaiah talks about all the nations coming to the light of Israel, including kings and camels and he names at least two of the gifts they will bring: gold and frankincense. The psalm also talks about the kings that will come when a righteous king is enthroned. The message is a little harder to see in Ephesians, but it's also there in Paul's joy that all nations, including the Gentiles, have come to know Christ. And finally, of course, it's explicit in the Matthew reading, the one we all know so well.

Contrary to the story in Matthew and the familiar hymn we'll sing shortly, you'll note that the text doesn't actually say that there were three wise men, nor does it say that they were kings. The number three seemed logical because there were the three gifts, although there's speculation that there were four, or six or even twelve. Since we just finished

the Christmas season, which always has jokes about fruitcakes, let me say that one person suggested that there were four, but the fourth gift was a fruitcake and the wise man who brought that was turned away. The “kings” part was undoubtedly picked up from Isaiah or the psalm, but Matthew just says “wise men from the east.” Some commentators are of the opinion that they were Zoroastrians, a sect from Persia, known for their study of the stars. So, astrologers, star gazers, or in a more modern idiom, one could even say star trekkers. For sure, they were barrier breakers. And for sure they were seekers, looking for signs, reading the stars, making inquiries.

Unfortunately, one of those inquiries was in Jerusalem, at Herod’s palace. On first reading, one wonders how wise they really could have been, because they should have guessed that a current king wouldn’t welcome news of a new king. But on second thought, I suppose it was logical to think that the new king would be the son of the reigning king so to Herod’s palace they went. There’s that line that says that when Herod heard of a new king he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him. Herod

was nothing if not paranoid. He'd been in place for a long time, for almost 40 years. There were a number of Herods – this is Herod the Great. The Romans trusted him; he'd kept the peace in Palestine for a long time. He was the one responsible for the rebuilding and enlarging of the Temple. I remember when we were in Israel, looking at a model of the Temple, which was itself very impressive, the guide pointed out that all Herod's building did a lot of good for the local economy. He could be generous, reducing taxes in difficult times and apparently once even melting down his gold plate to buy corn for the starving populace. But his big flaw was paranoia. He was absolutely ruthless in getting rid of anyone that he thought posed a threat – that included his wife and mother-in-law and three of his sons. He even arranged, when he hit 70, to have a large number of notable citizens imprisoned so that, upon his death, they would all be executed and therefore the occasion of his death would be a cause for mourning. So when Matthew says he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him, we know why – it was in everyone's best interest to keep him

happy because they knew what he was capable of. So Herod consults his own wise men, and they find the right passage and direct the seekers to Bethlehem, but not before Herod lies and tells them he too wants to worship this new king so they should be sure to come back and tell him where the child is to be found. By this time, however, they had figured out who they were dealing with, so they were wise enough not to return through Jerusalem, wise enough to know that power once held is difficult, if not impossible, to relinquish.

So they travel on, find the child, and present their gifts of gold, a gift for a king; frankincense, a gift for a priest; and myrrh, which was used in embalming – foretelling the offering this child would make of his life.

Just like the Christmas story, the Epiphany story can be read on several levels: the level of the story itself and then at least two deeper levels. The level below the story has given rise to other stories – like O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi" in which husband and wife each sell what's most precious to them to buy a gift for the other, which addresses the subject of gift-

giving, and how at its best it represents the heart of the giver. Or the story about a housewife named Baboushka who is busy cleaning when the first wise man goes by and asks her to accompany him. She's too busy with her housework, she says. And the second invites her when she's doing the laundry, so she can't go then either. I can't remember what she was doing the third day, but, of course, she can't go then, either. The story is a reminder that we can be so busy with our routine stuff that we don't go on the journey and never seek that face of God which we were born to see. And then there's the story of the fourth wise man, named Artaban. He's prepared to go, but for some reason, he misses the meeting place and when he gets there the others have gone ahead. He has several jewels that he plans to use to finance the journey but he's only part way along when he meets a sick and dying man. Should he continue, ignoring the man, or turn aside to help? He chooses the latter, nursing the man until he recovers. When he gets to Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph and the baby have fled to Egypt and the other magi have already started their return journey. He lodges with another family but when Herod's

soldiers arrive to murder all the Hebrew boys under two, (which you will remember occurs in a later passage in Matthew) he uses another jewel to bribe a soldier to spare the life of the child of the family he's living with. He continues his search throughout the ancient world, spending his wealth on the needy as he goes. And his search, after 33 years, finds him in Jerusalem where he's heard about a man they call the "king of the Jews" who is about to be executed. He realizes that this might be the one he's been searching for all his life and tries to get to Golgotha, but once again, he sees suffering, in this case, someone being hauled off to slavery and he spends the last of his wealth buying the person's freedom. When Artaban lies dying he hears the voice of Christ saying that he truly saw him and ministered to him by all the good he did along the way – when you did it for the least, you did it for me.

The deepest level of the story, though, is about two things: these were outsiders who were welcomed in, they were seekers who sought the face of God.

First, they were outsiders, "coming from the East." They were different, exotic, and NOT Hebrews. The

Hebrews, perhaps because of a perceived necessity to preserve their identity, had always seen themselves as the chosen people and, therefore, by definition, they were insiders and others were not. But they also had other scriptures, with a different message, beginning with Abraham, that were more inclusive. You'll remember that God told Abraham that he was to be blessed so that all the families of the earth could be blessed by him. That same universality is what we're hearing in Matthew this morning. "Strangers" came and were welcomed. The deeper message? In God there is no OTHER. All are loved, all are welcomed, all are to be cared for. Edwin Markham has a poem that addresses this movement:

They drew a circle that shut "us" out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout
But love of God had the wit to win
Christ drew a circle and took all in.

And a note of caution, this desire to exclude, to draw that circle in a way that keeps others out, has continued down through history and is alive and well in our times. And part of this Gospel message is

that if we are followers of Christ, we're to be about drawing ever-larger circles that take people in.

And, finally, there's the idea about being a seeker of God. Each of us is called to that journey, to move ever deeper until we too have an epiphany. The word, in Greek, is *epifaneia*, and it means, radiance, or the shining of the face. That's our call; to come face-to-face with the radiant and loving God. And then, having seen that, to be a light for others.

Someone has noted that our journeys are a lot more like those of the wise men than like those of the shepherds. The shepherds had a visit from a very talkative angel – they were told where to go, what to look for, who would be there, what they'd find when they got there and how to get there. But the wise men had to search and trust. Their journey, like ours, included some confusion, some wandering, lots of questions, perhaps some wrong turns and lots of dedication. But the promise is that in the end, we too will get there. We're asked to be observant, to watch for our own epiphanies, because we are not devoid of angels. Amen.