

2 Christmas, Yr. B

January 3, 2021

Jeremiah 31:7-14, Psalm 84, Matthew 2:1-12

Even though we are a few days away from the actual feast of the Epiphany, which is on January 6, the lectionary gives us the option of using the traditional Epiphany reading, which tells the well-loved story of the coming of the wise men. It's good, though, to begin by reminding ourselves about the meaning of the word, which refers to a manifestation of a deity, but which also can refer to an experience of insight, a new insight or vision or perspective that changes our understanding and the way we see the world.

As always, this text from Matthew can be read on a number of levels. For kids doing Christmas pageants, it's a great text. Who wouldn't want to be picked to be a king – with a crown and a sweeping robe and a glorious gift, even if it's a cigar box, it's still wrapped in gold – certainly more glorious to be a king than to be a shepherd. But the adult reader recognizes that Matthew's nativity story is much darker than Luke's. In Matthew, Jesus' birth brings fear and opposition, right from the beginning. We hear that in this text, when the wise men are warned by the angel not to return and advise Herod of the baby's location and we know it in the next part of the story in which Herod orders the slaughter of all baby boys in Bethlehem in an attempt to get rid of any competitor to his throne.

Let's look first at the text. If we were singing, we'd no doubt be singing We Three Kings, but you'll note that Matthew only calls them "wise men" and doesn't say how many there were. The lack of specifics in this text has led to an amazing amount of midrash – a filling in of the text. So there's speculation about how many there were, who they were, where they actually came from. Whether they were kings or

astrologers. It was apparently Longfellow who gave them their names, Melchior, Balthasar and Gaspar. And they are often depicted as from different races, one white, one black and one brown - certainly symbolizing the universality of God's love – everyone is invited, everyone is included.

Even humorists have had something to say about this. One, speculating about their gender, says we know for sure they were guys because the gifts weren't wrapped. If they had been, Matthew would have surely noted that with some dialogue that went something like this: And lo, the gifts were inside 600 square cubits of paper. And the paper was festooned with pictures of Frosty the Snowman. And Joseph was going to throw it away, but Mary saideth unto him, "Holdeth it! That is nice paper! Saveth it for next year!" And Joseph did rolleth his eyeballs. Well, maybe....

What we DO know about them is that they were searchers – for knowledge, for truth, for God. A few weeks back, I told the story about the young boy playing hide and seek and when the other kids were called in to dinner, no one came to find him. When he told his Rabbi grandfather about it, the Rabbi said, "Ah, that's the experience of God. He hides himself in the universe and no one cares enough to look for him." These men had been studying and waiting and watching. And, no doubt to the puzzlement of their families and friends, when they saw the star, they set out. This alone deserves some thought. Who searches? And why? It's interesting, don't you think, that when the kings turn up at Herod's court, they were in the wrong place. Some have thought that they were relying on a prophecy in Isaiah which said that nations would come to Jerusalem. And it seems logical, in a way. Jerusalem, the capital, the seat of power, the happening place. But when they are asked, the chief priests and scribes point instead to the Micah text about Bethlehem. Bethlehem, the backwater, small,

undistinguished. Who would have thought! One interesting side note here is that Bethlehem translates into “House of bread” which is, indeed, what it became with the birth of Christ, who is bread for the world. But the priests and scribes, even though they, too had been studying (they knew the right verses after all) didn’t go. So you end up with three entirely different responses to the appearance of the star, to this epiphany. There are the searchers, the wise men, who are willing to do whatever it takes to follow, to find the house of the Lord, to find this child destined to become the king of the Jews. And then you have the indifferent – the priests and scribes. Perhaps they find this of mild abstract interest, or perhaps they have become jaded and cynical, realizing that the best thing, the most expedient thing, for them to do is to stay close to the power in Jerusalem. And then you have the response of Herod: hostility, murderous hostility, fear, paranoia. He moves as well, to stamp out any possible threat to his power. I would suggest that those three reactions are still with us today. Searching, indifference, hostility. Perhaps now, at the beginning of this new year, after a year that held more than its share of challenges, a year that we are glad to be leaving behind, we have a new beginning and perhaps, therefore, this is a good time for us to think about all this. Where am I going? What’s important enough to move me? You’ll remember Frederick Buechner saying that if you want to know what you really believe, watch to see where your feet take you.

So searching, journeying is one theme of this gospel. The psalm also talks about this, about the desire and longing for the courts of the Lord and about the journey to get there – through the desolate valley to be rewarded with a place of springs. That idea of journeying to God is also in the reading from Jeremiah. He’s telling the Israelites that all the journeying they’ve done, all the suffering, all the displacement, all the exile, will come to an end. God will gather them back and their lives

will be characterized by prosperity and joy. It's interesting to note that later Jewish scholars will look at the Diaspora, that period which in many ways continues to this day, as a necessary scattering of the Jews around the world. Necessary because that was the way that God's message was to be spread. They had been scattered in order to spread God's word and, in the end, they will be gathered back to God as "a shepherd gathers his flock." And there's a tie to the kings and the shepherds before them – they didn't stay at the stable, they went home, as different people, with a story to share with others.

There's another theme that's front and center in this Gospel. A theme that's illumined by the star, by the experience, by the story. And that's the question and reality of power. Herod believes in one kind of power: brute power. He had struggled to save his throne and did so by calling in the help of the Romans. There was dissent to his rule, which he crushed in the time-honored way of all tyrants. He killed anyone he saw as a threat, including relatives. Perhaps this is a truth of all worldly power: those who have it can be very reluctant to give it up. So Herod had the kind of power that meant that when he was afraid of losing it, he could use that power to make sure that everyone around him knew what crossing him could do. As Matthew puts it: Herod was frightened and ALL Jerusalem with him.

The contrast with God's power couldn't be more stark. Instead of big and powerful Jerusalem, Jesus was in little Bethlehem. Instead of a palace or temple, he's born in a stable. Instead of courtiers, there are lowly shepherds. The power of God is the power of love and compassion and inclusion. That's the truth we can see in the light of that star. And we are the ones who have seen this truth and we are also the ones called to tell about it and live it out. A good start to a new year! Amen.

