

**Wise men and strangers.**

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Christmas: Yr C: Jer 31:7-14; Ps 84; Eph 1:3-6, 15-19; Mat 2:1-12

The Christmas of our culture compresses the events surrounding Jesus' birth into a single moment. The iconic Christmas card depicts a manger under the night sky with the Star of the East shining brightly, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds the sheep, the cows and the wise men standing around a wooden manger, looking reverently at the Christ. Thus, today's reading about the wise men seems almost late. Haven't we finished with Christmas?

Let's start, however, with a few comments about our reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah wrote at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in about 525 BCE, a time of turmoil and great fear. The leadership and upper classes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel had been hauled off in captivity the Babylonians, and the Southern kingdom knew that it would suffer a similar fate, sooner rather than later. So the Prophet is trying to both tell the truth, and convey a sense of hope, a tough challenge in light of what had happened, including Jeremiah having been condemned to death, a not uncommon fate for people who stand up and tell the truth to those in power.

In our reading, we hear Jeremiah, moving beyond prophetic speeches of judgement and imperative calls for repentance, to proclaim a whole new action by YHWH.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations,  
and declare it in the coastlands far away;  
say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,  
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."

For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,  
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

There is a tradition in Christianity, going back to the very first New Testament writings, of finding a double meaning in Old Testament prophetic writing. Thus, our tradition says Jeremiah was not only writing about the Israelite's return from exile, but also about the birth and the significance of Christ. Particularly in our Advent and Christmas readings, we hear Old Testament passages that to us clearly describe events surrounding Christ, as well as events that happened long before Christ.

The portion of Jeremiah we heard read today is commonly called the Book of Hope. Jeremiah is unambiguously certain that exile and living as refugees in a foreign land, is not the final fate for Israel. And we can see why Christian writers would include these words of great hope in Christmas readings.

In our reading from the Gospel of Matthew, the story of the appearance of the Three Wise Men, sometimes called Magi. Magi is the Greek word for wise men or astrologers. June Cook asked, in her reflection on this Gospel reading, who were these wise guys? June is right that the Gospels don't tell us, except that they were from "the East" and we can infer they studied the patterns in the stars and other heavenly objects.

We do know that the study of the stars and planets was a major focus of one of the world's most ancient religions, Zoroastrianism. Followers of Zoroastrians today are found in Syria, Iran and Iraq. They are a small and much persecuted remnant of the religion of the empire of Babylon during the time of the Hebrew exile.

While in Iraq last September, we met refugees known as the Yazidi who live around Mt. Sinjar in Western Iraq. The Yazidis are monotheists, believing in God as creator of the world, and they study the movements of the stars and planets. The Yazidi worship fire as a manifestation of God, an idea derived from Zoroastrianism. The Yazidi religious leaders are sometimes called Magi. Because Yazidi are neither Christian nor Muslim, they are much despised in the Middle East, and they were targeted by the so called Islamic State, with several thousand of their women and girls kidnaped in 2014 to serve as sex slaves.

So perhaps the three men from a foreign land in the East, who came to Bethlehem following a star, were followers of Zoroastrianism, and were in some way ancestors of the Yazidi of today.

Last week in the Skagit Valley Herald, the cartoon "Non Sequitur" began with a panel depicted three men with beards riding camels and following a star. (And we know great Wisdom can be found in cartoons.) The next cartoon panel shows them still mounted on their camels, staring at a stone wall, topped with threatening search lights and men with pitchforks. On the wall below the lights and pitchforks was a sign, "NO FOREIGNERS." In the last panel, the three men are shown, still on camels, but obviously downtrodden and

disappointed, as they have changed direction and are now traveling away from the star.

Given our nation's increasing paranoia about foreigners in general, and refugees in particular, I wonder if we wouldn't have send the wise men packing if they showed up on our shores.

The imperative to welcome and care for refugees, or strangers as they are more often called in scripture, is forcefully stated throughout the Old and New Testament. In the book of Deuteronomy, the rationale for welcoming the stranger is that "for once you were strangers in Egypt." All Americans, other than the remnant of our Native American population, are immigrants or can trace their roots to immigrants to America. We pride ourselves on being a nation of immigrants. Yet has anyone in our national government, other than the President, said we should welcome refugees from Syria and Iraq?

Jesus was particularly clear and forceful about welcoming the stranger. In a passage in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus, a couple of days before the crucifixion, and in the context of his proclamation of the coming kingdom of God, offers a metaphor of the final judgment, Jesus says:

*"Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who will receive good things from my Father. Inherit the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world began. I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.'*

*"Then those who are righteous will reply to him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothes to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?'*

*"Then the king will reply to them, 'I assure you that when you have done it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you have done it for me.'*

The refugees flooding the world are, at great risk, homeless, hungry and fleeing war and oppression to seek a place to live in peace. Regardless of their

religion -Yazidi, Muslim, Christian - each is an individual deeply loved by God and created in God's image. To welcome them to our country may be a risk, it may be hard, it may be costly, but for followers of the Christ, those excuses count for nothing. God calls us to step forward and glorify Christ through selfless sacrifice, hospitality and love. The refugees of today are the hungry and thirsty, the naked, the strangers of Jesus' parable.

Jesus' birth to a teenage mother on the doorstep of the megalomaniacal ruler Herod, in a land occupied by a foreign power, was not a risk free event. The flight to Egypt by the Holy family was not a vacation outing. Jesus, in his ministry, citing the risk, did not refuse to travel through Samaria, or refuse to help strangers because they posed a risk. Jesus talk to large crowds and proclaim, unceasingly, the coming kingdom of God. He did not shy from to healing the sick regardless nationality or religion. Can we do any less?

To reject refugees would be to reject Christ. As one Christian commentator recently said, "It may cost us wealth, comfort, time, energy and even our sense of well being, but this is what following Jesus means: to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love refugees."

Amen.

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