

2nd Sunday after Christmas

Jan 4, 2015

Matthew 2: 1-12

Wise men bearing gifts

I love talking about the wise men, because they have a lot to do with my ministry as a hospital chaplain – which I will explain. I can't resist starting by sharing with you the words of a pundit, who said the wise men came bearing three gifts: gold, common sense and fur to keep warm.

Epiphany – the celebration of the coming of the light into the world – is January 6 (Tuesday). Epiphany is the capstone of the season of Advent and Christmas. The liturgical season between the birth and before the Epiphany is called Christmastide.

Many of us – perhaps most of us– spend our lives in this Christmastide season of faith, knowing about the Christ child and searching for God's incarnate presence on earth. We want a personal encounter with Jesus. Because we love God, we are willing to give all that we have; yet we hold back, because we are waiting to see for ourselves. We are like the wise men, journeying to see the God child, carrying our gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

In the Old Testament reading, the prophet Jeremiah speaks God's words to the exiled remnant of Israel, encouraging their hopes for the restoration of Judah following the Babylonian exile. God's salvation of Judah is promised: the salvation of all those scattered in exile, including the lame and the blind, not just the fit.

'*The wise men from the East*' (Matthew's Gospel) who seek the Christ child may well have been descendants of the very Babylonians who sent the people of Judah into exile. 'From the east' meant 'from the rising sun', a fitting metaphor of the coming of the light to God's people. The wise men were Gentiles – outsiders, not Israelites – foreigners, seeking the Messiah.

Was Jesus not the *Jewish* Messiah? Did he not come to bring salvation to the Jews?

Little, if any, of the story of the wise men is substantiated historically or archeologically. Much of the tradition is imaginative embellishment of the Scripture. We assume there were *three* wise men because there were three gifts. If the wise men were 'magi,' they were likely part of the priest/astrologer class of Persia. Armenian tradition and a Greek manuscript dating to about 500 C.E. assign names to the wise men: Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar. The Hebrew Scripture, particularly Isaiah 60 and psalm 72, anticipates *kings* will bring gifts to the Jewish messiah, and so the tradition grew that the wise men were, in fact, kings: kings of Persia, India and Arabia. That they might be kings of these lands added exotic costume, turban and crown, as well as diverse ethnicity and skin color. Wise men, magicians, mathematicians, astrologers, astronomers, kings: the tradition calls them all 'magi.'

Matthew's Gospel story captures our imagination. Why is it important that distinguished foreigners from far away visited Jesus after his birth? The magi come first to King Herod to inquire about the child, and then 'return another way'. The magi do not reappear in the Scripture, although a later tradition has them baptized by St. Thomas on his way to India.

In Matthew's story, the wise men kneel down to pay homage to the child, a gesture of great respect reflected in our Christian worship today. Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are not the traditional Jewish offerings to God of sheep and calves.

On Christmas Eve, after the gentle, 'silent night' story of the birth of the Christ child, we sing *Joy to the World – the Lord has come!* But the wise men's sudden appearance (and disappearance), the evil Herod's plot to kill the children of Bethlehem which follows, and the Holy family's escape to Egypt to find shelter among the Gentiles, posit a different sort of message, perhaps there should be a *warning* sign that with the Messiah we should expect the unexpected, a sign something like, '*a plot twist is nigh!*'

The first plot twist – the unexpected turn – is found in the opening genealogy of the Gospel according to Matthew, the first book of the New Testament. Genealogies are common in the Hebrew scripture and were used to demonstrate status. Ancestor lists focused on men, so patriarchal status. Chapter 1, verse 1 of Matthew reads, "*an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*" Jesus was born of the royal family of David, and descendant of the patriarch Abraham, and therefore a true Israelite.

But wait – this genealogy includes women, and not just women, but women of questionable repute and even non-Israelite. There is Tamar, once a prostitute; Rahab, a Gentile of Jericho and also a prostitute; Ruth, a Gentile who had a liaison with a wealthy Jewish man; Bathsheba, wife of the foreigner Uriah the Hittite, and with whom King David committed adultery. Mary, an unwed teen.

The Messiah's family genealogy is messy. There are broken as well as noble folks, there are foreigners, Gentiles. The birth of Jesus the Messiah is not just a Jewish story. Jesus is part of the story of the Gentiles as well as the Jews, the story of all humankind. The wise men stand for all nations who would come to worship Jesus; the shepherds in Luke's account stand for the outcasts, the downtrodden. 'Most highly favored' Mary is all women who give birth, who raise and nurture the children of God.

The wise men coming to see the baby cracks wide open any attempt to limit the announcement of God's salvation to the people of Israel. God reveals himself to the Gentiles who were formerly bitter enemies and oppressors of Judah. They come to worship him on bended knee. God comes to all people, God's salvation is offered to all.

What was the evidence of the Messiah's birth? The angel's annunciation and the rising star's light. Having seen the evidence, the shepherds and the magi wanted to see the child born King

of the Jews. Relying on the fact that important foreigners sought the child in Herod's kingdom, Herod set about to destroy the child and killed the innocents of Bethlehem.

More than 2000 years later, we search for evidence of Jesus' existence. We are fascinated by corroborating archeological discoveries. About a year ago, the magazine *Biblical Archeology Review* published an article titled, "Archaeology Confirms 50 Real People In the Bible." That article was directed towards the Hebrew Testament stories. Writing in the magazine's January 2015 edition, the same author, Lawrence Mykytiuk, published another article, "Did Jesus Exist?" He suggested that the Bible as evidence was biased because it is 'a theological text written by committed believers.' *Biblical Archeology Review*, January/February 2015, "Did Jesus Exist?" p. 45-51.

Mykytiuk identifies several extra-Biblical sources – non-Christian Roman and Jewish writings – which refer to "Christos" (which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah). These writings are about other things, other events. Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived in Rome, was unique as a Jew who had Roman imperial patronage and protection. Chronicling the execution of James in 62 C.E. in Jerusalem, Josephus identifies James as "'the brother of Jesus who is called Messiah."

Cornelius Tacitus was a Roman senator, orator and Roman historian; he was said to despise Christians. In his biography of Nero, Tacitus details Nero's persecutions of the Christians, and speaks of Jesus' execution "in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate."

The late first century/early second century writings of Tacitus, Josephus and others hostile to Christians confirm the Christ's existence as a man, whose personal name was Jesus, had a brother named James, won over both Jews and Greeks but was held in disfavor by the Jewish leaders of the day, and was executed by crucifixion according to a decision by Pontius Pilate. The *Biblical Archeology Review* article also notes that,

'no ancient person ever seriously argued that Jesus did not exist...[no] pagans and Jews who opposed Christianity denied Jesus' historicity or even questioned it.' *Ibid.*

Still, like the wise men, we want to see for ourselves.

Our search for evidence of Christ takes many forms. The fact is that the Christ is among us now, if we know to look for him. He is with us in the Church, the body of Christ. He is with us in the sacraments. He is with us among the outcasts, the foreigners, the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoners: in the least of these.

The wise men were 'spiritual, not religious', Gentiles not Jews. They journeyed to see the Christ *because* God invited them. We are reminded to pray for and respect those who do not share our faith, or our faith story, for they, too, seek God.

Where do you look for evidence of the Christ's presence? This week, I will be on rotation as hospital chaplain. There are many opportunities to see evidence of Christ's presence in hospital ministry. Central to a chaplain's work is finding Christ's presence in others and showing respect, deference to their experience – in other words, being like a wise man.

Imagine yourself a wise man this week– look in surprising places for people to whom you can show unexpected respect and kindness. Bring them gold, common sense and fur to keep warm. Or, look for someone of another faith and treat that person as if *she* is a wise man: learn about her tradition, what she values; open yourself to the understanding that this person of another faith has gifts to give.

Amen.

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