

WHAT GIFTS CAN WE BRING?

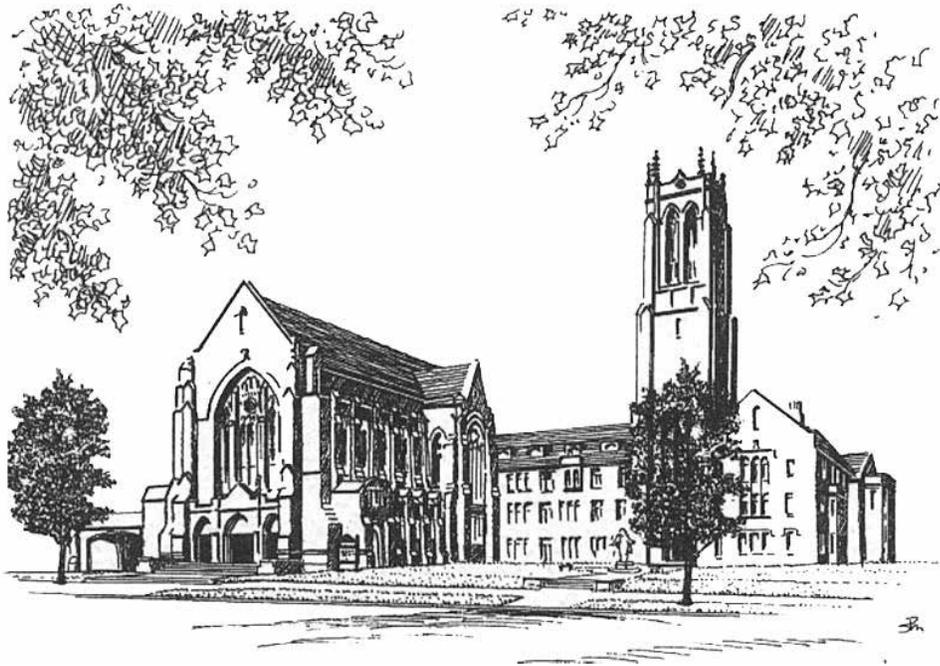
by

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January 5, 2014

Epiphany Sunday

9:45 and 11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts:

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; and Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;

¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The news of Jesus' birth drew the attention of many — these visitors from the east and from King Herod himself.

We don't know much who these visitors were. Wise men, kings, astronomers or astrologers of some kind.

People have speculated over the centuries who they might have been.

Some say they were most likely three members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, noted for their study of the stars as part of their religion. Incidentally, there are a couple of thousand Zoroastrians in Houston today. I participated in a community Thanksgiving service a few years ago at Rothko Chapel. I represented all of Christendom — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — a little daunting!

As for our wise men, some think they come from the Zoroastrian tradition. In the sixth century, The Arminian Christian Church assigned them the names Melchior (representing a Babylonian scholar), Caspar (Persian scholar), and Balthazar (an Arab scholar). Their gifts are ordinary gifts one would offer to a king: gold has great value; frankincense is a perfume; and myrrh is a common anointing oil. The gifts have symbolic significance in light of the identity of the baby to whom they are given. Gold is a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (used for incense) is a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) is a symbol of death — a forecast of things to come.

And I guess you noticed that Matthew never tells us how many visitors there were. But since Matthew mentions three gifts, later Christian tradition came to identify three visitors.

This first Sunday in the new year and a few weeks that follow in the Christian tradition are known as Epiphany, meaning manifestation or revelation. In our Gospel story, the star is one of those signs pointing the way to God and of course Jesus himself is the manifestation, the truest revelation, if you will, of God.

No doubt as you and I begin this new year, we would welcome any sort of revelation from God, any manifestation, any visible sign of the presence of

God in our lives. And like the wise visitors, we would like a sign to show us the way.

The late twentieth-century Catholic writer Thomas Merton prayed this earnest prayer: maybe some of you will resonate with its honesty.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

The truth is, we don't always know where we are going. Even the wise men ended first up in Jerusalem — nine miles away from Bethlehem, off their mark.

It is something of a metaphor for our faith journeys, too. Earnest as we are, faithful as we might try to be, looking for signs, for any hint as to the right way to go, we don't always know the way before us. The wise men found their way, and we can too.

Thank God for the promise of presence, in a star, in a baby huddled in a manger, whatever it may be — a sign that God is still God, God will never leave our side, and God is up to good in the world.

A common theme worth noting in the three lessons appointed for this day is the manifestation of God to people outside the official religious community:

Isaiah reminds the community of its call to be a light to all the nations.

The author of Ephesians suggests that the ultimate purpose of God is the unity of people in a truly diverse community where all distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders” have gone away.

One scholar notes that The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that such distinctions began to erode with the coming of Christ, who was revealed to some who were thought to be on the outside and, paradoxically, rejected by many who were thought to be on the inside.

God’s glory may be manifested where we least expect it. Sometimes God’s people become light for others (Isa. 60:3; Eph. 3:10); sometimes they appear blind to the light others, like these men from the east, can see (Matt. 2:1-6). But always, the light is there, as God graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into human lives.

It was Albert Einstein who said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.”

Or from the contemporary poet and writer Christian Wiman, “Wonder is the pre-condition for all wisdom.”

And it is that mystery, that wonder elicited by the manger and its occupant that we celebrate through the story of the Wise Men at Epiphany.

In this new year, we shouldn’t be mistaken or naïve. Herod has a thousand faces. He is alive today in betrayals, coercions, hatred and deceit of all sorts. The Christian life does not promise immunity from the Herods we will encounter this year. In fact friends, we **know** hard times will come; none of us know what this year will entail. After all, the Christ Child himself had to flee and ultimately face the evil that pursued him.

And yet, we believe that in this same year, there will be stars, signs, wise ones, shepherds, and, yes, Christ himself that will come and meet us. And our only response will be to want to give, to worship, to pay homage as these ones did.

And what can one give to the God who made us and all things?

I have a friend whose husband was a carpenter and owned his own hardware store. Around this time at Christmas every year she would say – “how do you buy a present for a carpenter husband who owns his own hardware store?!”

Or, say your beloved loves books and owns a book store. What sort of gift do you bring them?

What is substantial enough, deep enough, generous enough to give to the redeemer of all humankind?

In a word — YOU

It is as simple and as challenging as that. It is like the children’s song about the drummer boy who approaches Jesus in the manger and wonders what he can bring. He is a poor boy the song goes, but the song climaxes by the boy realizing that what he can give is what he has: I’ll play my drum for Him, the song goes.

And so it is with us. We offer God what we have, not something else we wish we had or someone else we wish we were. We offer what we have, who we are; we offer ourselves.

We can do something else with our lives you know. We don’t have to worship, give, serve, study. We don’t have to give up anything, sacrifice, offer anything really. We can live this new year any way we want to.

And yet what if. What if in this new year, we discovered that life is better when we worship, give, study, and serve?

What if we learned that community is better than loneliness?

What if we learned that loyalty is better than betrayal and honesty better than deceit?

What if we learned that sacrifice is better than greed and giving of ourselves, our gifts, and our lives is really better, that there is more joy in that than we thought?

What if we grew in grace, in love, in prayer, in giving, in worship?

And if we did discover all of that in newer, deeper, more mature and profound way, I think that would be the gift that God would most take joy in receiving. Because by grace we would give it, give ourselves back to the One who created us.

And not just you and me but us together, St. Paul's Church.

There is an impoverished section of a city in Kenya that a pastor friend of mine visited about two years ago I guess. This slum holds 600,000 of the poorest people on the planet. There is a Methodist church in this slum. The children in this village had nowhere to go to school and after a period of prayer, this Methodist church decided to turn itself into the school their community needed. They went to their wooden church building, modest as it was, and they dismantled it, piece by piece. Removed boards, removed nails, completely took it apart and built a school in that village using the same materials. Now they worship in the school they built.

This church gave itself away and found itself in the process.

What would happen if you, we together, once again in this new year found ways we could give ourselves away as an offering to God through our family, friends, our church, this city?

My hunch is we would find our true selves and the presence of God made manifest.

As we approach the Lord's Table today, I'm reminded of its promise, that God would meet us here, that we might have epiphanies in this holy moment.

May it be so today and every time we gather.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.