

RE-TURN

January 1, 2012, at 8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(Epiphany Sunday)

by Rev. Shelli Williams



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

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.

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.

I. Back to Normal

Happy New Year! It's almost over – this season of readying and wrapping, of decking the halls and visiting with friends and family, of over-running and over-eating and over-spending. If you're like me, you love all there is about Advent and Christmas, but when it's time for it to be over, you're ready. You're ready to go back to normalcy, back to your usual schedule. You're ready to go back to your life.

When I was little, we had a manger scene that sat on the entry table of our home during the Advent and Christmas season. I think that it was probably my favorite decoration. Putting it out meant that Christmas was here. And during the season, my brother and I would continually move it around and change the story a bit. Sometimes the Mary and Joseph were in the stable and other times they were carefully but precariously placed on the roof. Sometimes the Shepherds were herding the camel and the Wisemen were traveling with a sheep or an angel. And sometimes the baby was in the manger and other times the character would show up in various other places throughout the house. But, always, at the end of the season, it was sad to me to put the manger scene away, to rewrap all the characters in their tissue paper that they wore for most of the year, put away the baby, and close the box. It was over. It was time to go back.

On this first day of a new year, we cannot help but look forward. It is time to go back. Some of us will resolve to do something better or something different. I'm sure that if we were to take an informal survey of those of us sitting here this morning, we would have plans to save thousands of dollars and lose thousands of pounds. Some of us have plans to be more organized, do more for others, or just re-connect with our own friends and family members. Going back doesn't mean that it has to be the same as before. We all know that it is a good time to re-evaluate our priorities, to re-direct our lives toward something better, to turn our lives around.

II. The Wisemen at the Manger

Our Gospel text this morning begins by setting us “in the time of King Herod.” So this is probably Herod the Great, who most scholars think ruled between the years of 37 and 4 BCE. The dates, though, are probably not as important as the point that there was a ruler in place (and a pretty ruthless and powerful one at that). And now this ruler hears that a king had been born in Bethlehem. Well, the formula is simple – a king is born, but a king is already here; and in Herod’s mind and the minds of all those who follow him, there is room for only one king. The passage says that King Herod was frightened and all Jerusalem with him. They probably were pretty fearful. After all, their world was about to change. The birth of this humble child is about to shake the very foundations of the earth and announce the fall of the mighty. Things would never be the same again.

So Herod calls for the wisest ones in his court. The writer of Matthew’s Gospel says that they’re from the East. Most think that this probably means that they were Magi, a Priestly caste of Persian origin that followed Zoroastrianism and practiced the interpretation of dreams and portents and astrology. So, in the passage, Herod sends these “wise ones” to find the new king so that he could “pay homage” to him. We of course know that this was deceitful. His intent was not to pay homage at all, but to destroy Jesus and stop what was about to happen to his empire. It was the only way that he could preserve what he had.

According to the passage, the wise men know that Christ was born; they needed God’s guidance, though, to find where Christ was. When they get to the place where the star has stopped, the passage tells us that they were “overwhelmed with joy.” They knelt down and paid the new king homage and offered him gifts fit for a king. Even though later interpreters have often tried to place specific meanings on these gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, it is possible that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew simply thought that these gifts, exotic and expensive as they were, were gifts that would be worthy of a great and mighty king. They were gifts of joy.

And then the passage tells us that, heeding a warning in a dream, these wise and learned (and probably powerful) members of the court of Herod, left Bethlehem and returned to their own country, a long and difficult journey through the Middle Eastern desert. Rather than returning to their comfortable lives and their secure and powerful places in the court of Herod, they left and went a different way. They knew they had to go back to life. But it didn't have to be the same.

III. A Holy Epiphany

Often people try to look upon this passage for “proof” that Jesus was born and that he was born at a certain time. Many have tried desperately to “legitimize” this story by attempting to align the time of Jesus’ birth with recorded natural phenomena. In all honesty, though, does it really matter if they were guided by a comet, a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, or a star? What matters is that they found what they were looking for and were changed in its finding.

But many of us still look for a way to make this story real to us. Think about it. In this particular passage, the Holy Family is entirely passive. Mary is often portrayed as a meek young woman. Joseph isn't even given a speaking part in the story. And the miracle of all miracles, this holy baby does nothing. Truth be told, this passage moves the story beyond the quiet safety of the manger. We realize that the manger is actually placed in the midst of real life, with sometimes dark and foreboding forces and those who sometimes get it wrong. The primary characters are, of course, God and these visitors, these foreign Gentiles who did not even worship in the ways of the Jewish faith. They were powerful, intelligent, wealthy, and were accustomed to using their intellect and their logic to understand things. You know, they were a lot like us. But they found that the presence of the Divine in one's life is not understood in the way that we understand a math equation. It is understood by becoming it.

So, later, they were given names. No, the names are not in the Scriptures. But around the sixth century, maybe in an attempt to make them seem to be more representative of the larger world, they were depicted as kings from various places:

Caspar, an Ethiopian king; Balthasar, an Arabian king; and Melchior of India or Southeast Asia. The irony, though, is that these visitors were effectively religious outsiders who were somehow changed by meeting Jesus and became the first of several characters in the Scriptures that point to the Gentile mission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” It is strange to think that these religious outsiders, these successful, probably wealthy, certainly intelligent individuals from the courts of the powerful King Herod could possibly be considered our earliest evangelists of the message of Jesus Christ simply because they were willing to give it all up and follow another road, because they were open to making the birth of Christ real in their own lives.

That is what this season of Epiphany is about – making Christ real in our lives. It has nothing to do with proof of the story. It’s about, rather, placing yourself in the story. It is about turning and going a different way and finding joy.

IV. Going Back

We all have to go back. We all have to return to our lives. But that manger so long ago is not that far removed from us. In fact, it’s really sort of in the middle of our lives. There’s a church near my house that changes its magnetic sign quite a bit with some sort of words of wisdom appropriate for whatever season it is. During this past week, it has read, “Rejoice in this season of the Lord’s visitation!”

I don’t think that’s exactly the case. God did not just visit our little earth so long ago and then return to wherever God lives. God came as Emmanuel, God With Us, and that has never changed. The birth of Jesus means that God was born in a specific person in a specific place. The Christmas story affirms to us that God is here, that the Messiah for whom we had waited has come, that we are in God’s hands.

But the Epiphany story moves it beyond the manger. And all of a sudden we are part of the story. We are part of the Incarnation of God, the manifestation of God’s Presence here on our little earth. The God in whose hands we rest danced into our very lives and is now all over our hands. It is our move. God was not just

born into the child Jesus; God is born into us, into humanity. The baby cannot just be put away in the manger scene box. The Incarnation of God happens over and over and over again. Christmas day happens each and every time that we see God in each other, that we see the sacred in this world, and that we see that we have the Divine all over us.

We cannot go back to life as it was. It doesn't exist.

So, what resolutions are you making this year?

What about resolving to, as we read in Isaiah, "lift up your eyes and look around?" Begin to see God's Presence in your life.

What about allowing yourself to be "overwhelmed with joy"?

What about changing perspective, re-turning your life to God, rather than returning to life the way it was?

What about going home by another road? The story of God's coming into our midst means that it is time for us to get going. We cannot go back to the way it was before.

You've probably heard this before, but one of my favorite poems is by theologian and civil rights leader, Dr. Howard Thurman. It goes like this:

When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The Work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,
To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.¹

Happy New Year! Christmas has begun. And now it's your move.

In the Name of the One who came, and comes, and calls us home by another way. Amen.

(Endnotes)

¹ Dr. Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas."