

January 6, 2008 Cycle A
Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12

I spoke with my sister a couple days ago and she was in the midst of struggling to take down her Christmas decorations and monitor the “help” she was getting from her three year old. Many of you may be wondering why our congregation still has our decorations up. And no, it isn’t because we forgot or couldn’t get anyone to take them down. But, it does rub against the world that has moved on to resolutions, caucuses, expectations of national titles in football, and long since removed the wise men from our nativities, packed away until next November.

Yet, the way of the church, when it is doing its job, runs counter to the world. On this rare occasion, the festival of Epiphany actually lands on a Sunday, so the rhythm of the church won’t let us leave the Christmas story behind, quite yet.

What is Epiphany? It is the twelfth day after the birth of Jesus. It is the day in the life of the church, set aside to celebrate the arrival and visitation of the wise men. At one time in our history, it was bigger than Christmas Day and was the day when gifts were exchanged, symbolic of the gifts the wise men brought to Jesus. It is the day set aside to celebrate the revelation and

manifestation of God's glory, witnessed in the birth of Jesus ... not just for the people of Israel (the Jews), but also for the Gentiles ... all nations who would be blessed by this blessing.

The world blends the birth stories of Luke and Matthew together, but if you read and ponder them separately you discover they each have important, distinct things they emphasize. Luke's telling is full of angels and shepherds – the good news we read on Christmas Eve. Matthew introduces the tension between two kingdoms, by telling about the journey of the wise men and the fear of King Herod.

Why these characters? Because Matthew knows his scripture ... he knows the prophecy of Isaiah 60 that we heard not too long ago. A vision of restoration to the people of Israel, who in 580 B.C. were exiled in present day Iraq. Jerusalem had been destroyed, their hope shattered, yet the prophet Isaiah boldly invites, "Arise, shine, for your light has come." God will restore you as a people and as a nation. And not only restore you, but other nations will come to you and bring you gifts of "gold and frankincense ... they will proclaim the praise of the Lord because of you ... through you, they will see the prosperity and peace of God's reign.

Well, the wise men were Persian astrologers, priestly sages able to make the connections of ancient writings, the stars, and translations of dreams. In our terms, we would call them pagans or new age spiritualists, who were from the region of Iran or Iraq. Can you picture turbans, flowing robes, and a wealthy caravan moving across the dry hills, in search of a king of the Jews they read about in Isaiah 60 (writings preserved from the time of the exile) and saw the stars align to point to this king's arrival.

They go where you would expect to find a king. They go to Jerusalem, the place of power, money and the place of the current king, Herod. If anyone knew where the next king was born, it would be the current ruler. Power is usually passed down to heirs. But, when these Gentile travelers show up with their gifts and talk of a predicted new Jewish king, Herod also vaguely remembers Isaiah's prophecy. He becomes frightened by the overlap of their arrival and the word of God. He senses God's involvement, which means that his reign of power could really come to an end.

So, he calls the wise men he knows, the chief priests and scribes, the religious leaders, who are the experts of scripture and Jewish law. Herod needs a way out and is hoping that there is a favorable interpretation of Isaiah 60, where possibly he can come out on top. But, instead of quoting Isaiah 60, the

Jewish scholars quote Micah 5, “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least ... from you shall come a ruler who is to rule Israel, whose origin is of old ...¹

This is worse than he expected. A ruler, who comes from among the people, grassroots... who is not of the ruling classes, ... who cannot be bought or bribed or lobbied... the only option is to get rid of the threat, like Herod did to so many others. So, he pours out his charm upon the wise men, telling them how grateful he is that they brought this new king’s birth to his attention ... that once they sort through the new information and find the whereabouts of this new king, he wants to go there and pay the king homage too. Responding to this revelation from God with fear, pride, and self-preservation, Herod sends the wise men off to Bethlehem with evil intentions ... he tries to use them to discover the location of the child and destroy the threat, before the boy can grow and word can spread.

As Old Testament professor, Walter Brueggemann reflected on these Epiphany lessons, he points out that Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem. He wonders about how close the wise men came to missing their destination. And yet, in stopping in Jerusalem, it holds up the important contrast of the

¹ Brueggemann, Walter, “Off by Nine Miles” (¹ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2103>)

two kingdoms, we still wrestle with today ... the displays of grandeur and self-sufficiency of Jerusalem verses the overlooked, unexpected promise of Bethlehem. The stop for directions also allowed God to use Herod's evil intentions for good, as Herod unintentionally gave the wise men the Word they needed in Micah 2 to complete their journey to Jesus.

But, the truly amazing part of this Epiphany journey is that the wise men don't resist this alternative location. They are intellectuals, wealthy, men of power. They were raised in a world that said more is better, success is reflected in how much money you have or servants or land. To maintain control you must exert might, fear, and strict absolutes. The self-sufficiency, tall towers, and prosperity of Jerusalem made much more logical sense for the reign of a king, than a tiny village, on a dusty road, filled with laborers and peasants ... vulnerable to attack or the whims of whatever army passed by. Which, if we continue reading on in Matthew, we discover Herod doesn't react well to the wise men's alternative route home and without a definitive location of the new king, decides to kill every boy, age 2 and under, in order to remove the threat.

Be honest. Which of the two descriptions most reflects your current visions of how God is revealed in the world today?

But, as Brueggemann concludes, “Our task is to let the vulnerability of Micah 5 disrupt the self-congratulation of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place. We are off by nine miles. We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency. Epiphany is a good time to take the journey, The way beyond is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.

The wise men, and the eager nations ready for an alternative, made the trip. It would be ironic if the "outsiders" among us made that move and we who are God’s own people resisted. Imagine a nine-mile trip . . . and a very different way home.”²

Imagine a nine-mile trip away from fear and anger and broken relationships, toward a life of forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace given by the in-breaking of an unexpected king in unlikely places,... a king who uses unconventional methods and people to bring all nations to the radiance of his everlasting light.

- *O God, we give thanks for the light of the star by which we are still led to the manger and far beyond. Encourage us in our journeys
and welcome us to that newer way where we will find ourselves and our home with you.
Amen.*

-Peter Gomes

² *Ibid.*