

Year A, The Day of Epiphany though celebrated the Sunday after Epiphany
January 8th, 2017

By Thomas L. Truby

Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-6

A Plan from the Beginning of Time!

The Day of Epiphany, the day we celebrate the wise men's visit to the Holy Child and the day the Christmas Season officially ends, was Friday, January 6th. Those of us who use the lectionary were given a choice this year for which text to focus on this Sunday. We can either use the readings for the Day of Epiphany or move forward 30 years in the life of Jesus and examine Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. I found the texts for The Day of Epiphany more intriguing and so I want to go backwards in time and in Matthew to the coming of the Magi. Last Sunday we talked about what happened after the Magi left; today we explore what their coming means for us.

Who are these Magi? Where did they come from; India, Mesopotamia, Persia; who knows? All we know is that they came from elsewhere, from outside, from some other culture and religion. They were foreigners and that may be the point Matthew is making in including them in his story of the birth of Jesus.

Were they scientists, astrologers, philosophers, or religious leaders in their own country? We don't know. What religion did they claim? It wasn't Judaism and it couldn't have been Christianity since this was long before its formation. I suppose they could have been Hindu. Why did Matthew include the three kings in his story? Could it be that Matthew saw them as a fulfillment of the prophets who wrote:

Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD'S glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you, God's glory will appear to you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.

Is Matthew saying Jesus is the dawning radiance and these kings are the nations coming to his light? Does Matthew see something universal happening here; powerful and outside the realm of divisive religion?

Our epistle lesson from Paul advances this same idea. Paul writes to the people in Ephesus, "This is why I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ for you Gentiles." Gentiles aren't Jews or Christians; they are of every religious persuasion and none; they're like the Magi. When the Magi bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they symbolize the whole world placing their gifts before Jesus. Each culture brings what is valuable to it, what they have to share with the world and Jesus receives them all. Jesus, a baby in a poor and dominated minority culture, in his radical weakness receives all their gifts. None are rejected and considered unworthy. While Jesus had to be born in a particular culture, he was born for us all and all are included. His birth

marks the end of “us” and “them.” The end of “us” and “them” is one of the major meanings of the “good news.”

Paul writes, “Earlier generations didn’t know this hidden plan that God has now revealed...This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and that they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ through the gospel.” Matthew is pointing toward the same thing when he includes the coming of the Magi in his story of Jesus’ birth. It is appropriate that their coming marks our Day of Epiphany, our seeing the light. Their presence at the birth scene shows us that Jesus’ coming to human-kind precedes all religion and embraces all persons no matter their religion.

Religion is built on separation; separating those we think of as good from those we think of as bad; those like us who believe this way from those unlike us who don’t; those who express their religion this way from those who express their religion that way. Jesus is not interested in separation. He wants to bring that which is separated into unity. This is why the foreign kings show up at the birth of Jesus and are led by a star. The star is a symbol of universal hope; a hope that comes from outside our violence soaked world.

The world longs for this star even as it eludes us. Matthew says “When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.” Their longing had been satisfied. A way of escape from Herod and his violence-based empire had been found. The escape lies in a house in Bethlehem and is the embodiment of human vulnerability.

Magi came from the east and asked where the new born king of the Jews is to be born. For them a new star signals his presence on earth. It’s a cosmic event and they have come to honor this new born king. They didn’t realize their good news would not be received with gladness by all. They believe God, whoever God is, is doing something new and he is doing it among the Jews. Its source is here but it has ramifications far beyond its source.

All of this was “good news” for the Magi but Herod and the political system that circled round him found it alarming. Empire does not like radical new things that might disturb its hold on privilege. “When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.” A potential opponent to their power had been detected and they must take measures to protect themselves. “He (Herod) gathered all the chief priests and legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born.”

The idea of a Messiah was a great hope for all the common people who suffered deeply throughout the land. Herod was against hope for hopeful people cause problems. He wanted people crushed and hopeless; to feel it useless to oppose him and so he had to blot out their hope before it gained momentum.

After discovering that the child was to be born in Bethlehem, “Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared.” Why was he meeting secretly with them? Was he afraid the chief priests and legal experts would expose him as a liar? Was he afraid they would switch allegiances and join forces with the future messiah in

their hope of replacing Herod? For whatever reason, he does not want them to know his real plan for the destruction of the child.

The kings come and Herod tells them to "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." What a lie! He doesn't care about this child or the Messiah. He wants to kill the child! Deceit and death, the two tools of empire, are now fully employed. But not all truth can be rooted out. The child and his mother still remain and the wise men go home by another way. An angel warns Joseph and the vulnerable family escape to Egypt. It's all part of a secret plan to preserve light for the whole human race.

In their innocence the three wise men had been drawn into the dark world of Herod but they had managed to make their escape. Now they were on the road again and the star they had seen in the east was still ahead of them. It was still there! The darkness of Herod's court had not put it out.

Paul writes, "God sent me to reveal the secret plan that has been hidden since the beginning of time by God who created everything....God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people," (Remember how vengeful and violent Paul had been; those were the days when Paul had the same spirit as Herod.) Back to the text, "God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles." The good news contains the message that everyone, even foreign kings and philosophers and violent men like Paul, have "bold and confident access to God through faith in him." Through the forgiveness revealed on the cross all barriers have been removed and no one is excluded. Jesus has shown us the open and welcoming face of God and even empire can't stop it. It's too late. It has already happened.

Now we know God is a God of life, joy and vitality and deception and death are on their way out. This is the plan God had from the beginning of time that he accomplished through Christ Jesus our Lord. Thanks be to God!