

January 15, 2017



"The Beloved Community"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

John 1:35-39a

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Before we get too far into the season of Epiphany, which on the church calendar continues from the Day of Epiphany, January 6th, on through to Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent., I want to circle back around this morning for a moment to those three wise men, the Magi, who made their way to Bethlehem to pay homage and present their gifts to the baby Jesus.

Who were those kings, and why were they there? By including them in the story of Jesus' birth, what are the Gospel writers telling us about the kind of Messiah Jesus is and about the Kingdom of God?

In legend, they've been given the names of Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. They ride camels and they are mysteriously wise and noble. To the babe, they bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And they are craftier than the Roman King Herod, for they refuse to reveal to him the whereabouts of the newborn Savior.

Who were these three we call Kings or Magi? Scholars have debated their identity forever. Some say they were shamans, teachers, healers, from among the ancient Medes. Others argue that they were Zoroastrian priests and astronomers from Iran. Others maintain that they were Iraqi astrologers clued into the story of Isaiah's ancient prophesy by Jews living in exile in Babylon. Still others conclude that they were Kurds. Still others insist that the Magi were coming from as far as China, following the ancient Spice Route.

No doubt, the debate will go on about their true identity. All the Biblical story tells us is that they hail from far beyond the bounds of the Jewish world. Call them Gentiles or pagans, call them Zoroastrians or Buddhist or Confucian scholars, in the story of Jesus' birth, these kings represent the peoples of the whole wide world, from earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast. It's as if they come onto the scene from beyond even the pages of Scripture itself, from beyond the worlds the Bible itself can adequately describe. They come from "the East," is the best Matthew's Gospel can put it, from so far away that our eyes have not yet seen it and we know not the full measure of its distance and range. They come into the story to represent the whole of God's world, even unto that which we do not know, speaking a language we do not speak, professing a faith not our own, seeking a wisdom we have yet to grasp.

Scripture brings these Kings into the story of Jesus' birth to signal that Christ brings the light of God into the world for the sake of the whole world. The wisdom of God is revealed in Christ "in its rich variety" as the Apostle Paul puts it, or, in a more literal translation, "in its multi-colored" expanse. This love, this light, this grace knows no boundaries, excludes none, is boundless in its height and depth and length and width. From the very beginning of Jesus' time on earth, at the heart of the story of the incarnation of God in human life, Scripture speaks of an all-embracing, generous love. Of a globe-encompassing mind-boggling love, big enough for mystery and diversity, strong enough to break every boundary that would divide us one from another.

I've told you that when I was a young pastor, a wise mentor suggested that every year on this hard-won holiday I return to the writings of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. And so this year, I found myself drawn again to his last book written in 1967: *Where Do We Go from Here—Chaos or Community?*

In the last chapter, Martin Luther King wrote about the beloved community, the world house, in which we must all live or perish together as fools. King imagines a novelist who dies. In his papers are found thoughts for a new book: a widely separated family inherits a very valuable home. In order to get the home, they have to return there and live together. King says that we humans are like that family: widely scattered and divided into nations, races, classes and ideologies, we have inherited the earth—the World House—and we have to learn how to live together in order to receive our inheritance.

He wrote: "We have inherited a large house, a great "world house" in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live together with each other in peace." Dr. King insists that we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or we will die together as fools.

Martin Luther King understood that it is love that binds us to one another in the beloved community, in one world house. He wrote: "When I speak of love, I am speaking of that force which all the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality beautifully summed up in the first Epistle of Saint John: Let us love one another: for love is of God and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love...if we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us."

As a Christian pastor and a preacher of the Gospel, Rev. King was, of course, grounded in the Scriptures, the Gospel, the life of Jesus Christ. I wondered how he might have answered the questions posed in the story we hear this morning from John's version of the call of the first disciples.

Remember how the story goes--after John the Baptist had baptized Jesus, he was standing with a couple of his own disciples. They see Jesus pass by and John exclaims: "Here is the Lamb of God!" John's disciples hear John say this and leave to follow Jesus. Jesus sees them and turns to ask: "What are you looking for?" And they respond with another question. "Rabbi, teacher", they call him, "where are you staying?" And Jesus says to them: "Come and see."

Before making up their minds to follow Jesus, they're bold enough to ask. Who are you? Are you of God? Are you the teacher we should trust? Where are you staying, meaning—where is your heart, what are you fundamentally about? Where are you staying?

This is all part of the theology of John's Gospel, his understanding of who Jesus is. At the very beginning of his Gospel, he wrote that in Jesus, God comes to stay with us. The Word became flesh and lived among us. That's what incarnation is. That's what we believe about Jesus. The Word made flesh. God with us. God living with us. God loving us so much as to become present with us here in this life. God abiding with us. God staying with us all.

It's all about staying, you see: God staying with us in Christ, us staying with God through Christ, us staying with God's people in the name of Christ.

The disciples knew enough to know that to understand who Jesus was and what he was about, they would have to stay where he was staying. They would have to dig deep into his true identity and learn his craft, if you will, learn all the ins and outs of his ministry and mission. Jesus draws them in. "Come and see" he says. And the Scripture tells us that indeed, they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. And they began to learn how much more there was to learn and how it would transform their lives.

I believe that Martin Luther King committed himself to staying with Jesus, to staying where Jesus stayed, to staying with all the people Jesus himself was determined to stay with---the children, the Samaritans, the tax collectors and sinners, the women, the meek, the poor, the downtrodden. Jesus determined to stay with them. And from the very moment of his birth, he determined to stay with those who chose to stay with him—the foreigners who had come from afar to honor him.

And out of this vision of where Jesus was staying, Martin Luther King envisioned the Beloved Community, the world house, where all had an honored place. He said: "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

And so, with new urgency, we ask ourselves anew the foundational Biblical questions-- "Who is my neighbor?", "Whose neighbor am I?" and "Who is my brother/sister?"

At the beginning of this New Year, I invite you to come and stay with Jesus this year--through prayer and service, through witness and study, through fellowship and giving. Come and see God in Christ, the Lamb of God, sharing the life and suffering of the world. Come and see the world in the light of Christ and his mission. Come and see God here, a people staying with Jesus, a people faithful and bold, committed to the glory and the righteousness of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. Come and see a faith community loving and secure enough to open our doors and our hearts to all God's children. Come and see the outline of the new beloved community, where all are welcome, all are cherished, all are embraced as sister and brother.

Where is Jesus staying? Here. In this world house. In this place of hope. In this beloved community of service and love. In this community of love, the promise of the good news of Jesus Christ, the source of our hope and our joy.

Come and see.

Notes:

Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

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