

“God So Loves the World: Our Eyes Are Open”

Homily by the Rev. Patricia Farris



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, asking, “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.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘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.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.”

When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Thanks not only to Matthew’s gospel, but to Christmas cards and carols and pageants and all the countless manger scenes we’ve seen, we know this story. “We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar...” From a far-off country, Three Kings have come to the manger, following a star, bearing gifts to the newborn king. In the calendar of the Christian year, they arrive on what we call the Day of Epiphany, which means “disclosure,” “manifestation,” “unveiling,” the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6th. We observe it on the closest Sunday. Epiphany--the day on which the divine nature of the newborn Christ is made abundantly evident or manifest to the Three Wise Men and hence, to the whole world.

In legend, the mysterious kings have been given the names of Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. They ride camels, having come from far away, and they are 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.

Scripture doesn’t tell us much about them, so scholars have speculated across the ages as to their true identity. Just who they really were remains something of a mystery.

Were they shamans, teachers, healers, from among the ancient Medes? Were they Zoroastrian priests and astronomers from Iran? Were they perhaps Iraqi astrologers clued into the story of Isaiah’s ancient prophesy by Jews living in exile in Babylon? Were they Kurds as some scholars have posited? Or did they hail from as far as China, following the ancient Spice Route...?

No one really knows. Perhaps in this, the Year of our Lord 2018, it’s important to simply focus on their importance to the story of Christ’s birth and the nature of God’s love--a love that embraces the whole of humankind, a love that calls no one “stranger,” a love that brings life to us all, and calls us into holy living that honors the commandment to seek God above all else. Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar show up at the manger to remind us that each of us, by name, is, in the birth of the Holy Child, called into a life-long quest for the living God and into lives that are faithful, honorable, and brave.

Just two weeks ago, I sat here in the pews to participate in our annual “No Fuss, No Muss” Family Christmas Eve service. It’s a participatory Christmas Pageant and families and kids love it. Everyone has a part. Kids can choose to be an angel, a sheep, a shepherd or a Wise Man. As they arrive, they can pick a crown, wings, a sheep ears headband, or a shepherd’s head-dress.

I sat behind a family of four—Mom, Dad, brother and younger sister. The little girl was sound asleep in her father’s arms, angelic, completely oblivious to all the excitement and commotion that comes with Christmas Eve and lots of kids. Her brother, on the other hand, was wide awake, and had chosen to be a Wise Man. He had his crown and it was perched rather triumphantly atop his head. The only problem was that the crown was bigger than his little head. It kept sliding down, over his ears, resting on his shoulders. Over and over again, his mother patiently oooched it back up to where it was supposed to be, and balanced it in place....which worked fine until he wiggled again, which was about every other second, and the crown would begin to slip back down.

As I thought about it later, that wayward, misfit crown came to symbolize to me how we all make our way through this life as those who strive to live as seekers and followers of this Holy Child of God. There are days, or moments anyway, when we’re riding high, sitting up atop our camels, backs straight, crowns in place, doing a pretty good job of making our way along.

But then there are days, maybe many days, when we just can’t seem to keep that crown in place. It tilts to one side or another. Some days it just works its way down to our weary shoulders and we need the love of God and the love of others to help get it back to where it should be. I think that’s why there were three kings and not just one. Three kings plus their entourage of camel wranglers and pages and other helpers. To borrow again from that perhaps over-worked African

proverb: it takes a village. We all need all the help we can get to make it through this beautiful journey called life with our crown, more often than not anyway, right where it should be and our feet on the path of the star that leads to Love.

We all need all the help we can get for this journey.

Pope Francis gave us all some good advice in his New Year's sermon, advice that reminds us of the covenant we made here last Sunday in our Covenant Renewal Service. He said: "At the beginning of the year, we too, as Christians on our pilgrim way, feel the need to set out anew from the center, to leave behind the burdens of the past, and to start over for the things that really matter." His advice included setting aside a moment of silence daily to be with God. Doing so, he said, would help "keep our freedom from being corroded by the banality of consumerism, the blare of commercials, the stream of empty words, and the overpowering waves of empty chatter and loud shouting." Instead, he prayed that we might focus on building a peaceful and welcoming world. He's reminding us, encouraging us, helping us keep our crown on our head and our feet on the path.

The Day of the Epiphany reveals to us the true nature of the Messiah God has sent to born among us, to be born within us. The Three Kings prod us to explore for ourselves the power of God's love, the import of this love, the range and depth of this love. We are invited to claim it for ourselves and to let its light illumine our lives with grace and peace. We are emboldened to share it with all who, by God's grace, cross our path and share our world. We are encouraged to invite in all who come from afar, who embody wisdom in forms that may be new to us. And we are tasked to insure all its benefits for the least and the last, the lonely and the lost, paying homage to a new king whose only power is love.

Now as we prepare to come to the Table of Life, in the name of the One who comes to live among us, may we covenant in this New Year of our Lord 2018 to live in the light of God's love, to follow the star, and if our crown tilts askew from time to time, to ask God or a fellow traveler to help us set things right.

Notes:

Frances D'Emilio . Pope on 2018: Forget life's 'useless baggage' January 1, 2018. In Religious News Service.

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First United Methodist Church • 1008 Eleventh Street Santa Monica, CA 90403
www.santamonicaumc.org ■ 310-393-8258