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Isaiah 60: 1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12
"Offerings to the Christ Child"
Rocky River Presbyterian Church
January 8, 2023

Today we are celebrating the start of the Epiphany Season, a time marked by the celebration of the recognition of the Christ Child. Our passage today is the familiar story of the wise men, who follow a star to see the one who has been foretold.

As we listen for God's Word speaking to us this day
from the Gospel of **Matthew 2: 1-12**
may we open ourselves to experience an Epiphany.

*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 way.*

This is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

During my first call in Decatur, GA, I was an Associate Pastor for Youth and Christian Education. The Church School teachers there were so dedicated. I would often find myself deep in conversation with these saints after worship was over because they were preparing their lessons for the next week. On one such occasion I found myself discussing today's passage. Some great questions quickly rose to the top of that conversation:

*"Did this story REALLY happen?
Were there only three magi?
Did they really follow a star?
How could a star act like that?
Do I believe it really happened?
Is it TRUE?"*

At times in the course of the discussion I think we all confused the actual details of story with the tradition of the story. This happens a lot because the story is SO familiar to all of us. How many pageants have we seen where there are ONLY three wise men dressed in bathrobes and crowns? In fact, how many pageants have we seen where these characters have names? Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar are the names widely accepted for these three foreign dignitaries who went searching for the new ruler of Israel. Where did these names come from?

The names and number are not in the Biblical story, but tradition has shaped our understanding of this text as much as the story itself. The text only tells us that wise men came from the east bearing three types of gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Through the years we interpreted that to mean there were only three travelers, but that is not what Matthew says. Matthew says, “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” (v.1). The truth of the matter is “we do not know who these wise men were, where they were from, or how many of them were there. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there¹.” We do not know the TRUE facts, we were not there. But that does not mean the story is not true.

This story has POWER, not because it gives us the best facts, but because it says something about Jesus and about God’s plan for his life and ministry. And by doing so, it says something POWERFUL about our lives.

In the Gospel of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, these Wise Men, these outsiders, are the **very first ones** to recognize the Christ Child. It wasn’t the Jewish shepherds tending the sheep, it wasn’t the Jewish inhabitants of Bethlehem, it was group of strange travelers from a foreign land who recognize the importance of this moment and pay homage to Jesus.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew is considered to be the most Jewish of all the Gospel writers. How can we know this? Well, this is because his writing reflects an uncanny familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures and the customs of the synagogue. It is believed that his primary audience was other Jew’s who would appreciate his many references to the prophecies of the messiah.

Matthew begins his Gospel, written primarily for other Jews, by saying that the first people to recognize this new King, the messiah, were total outsiders, were pagans. They were the first ones to bring gifts and worship Jesus. In doing so, Matthew says from the beginning that this baby, this Messiah, this gift from God, is not only for the Jews, but for the WHOLE world. He wasn’t only for those who knew the prophecies of old, but for those who were new to recognize him. He wasn’t only for those considered acceptable, but for all people, everywhere, even us.

We don’t know everything about this story. We can’t pin down all of the facts; we can’t explain the super natural movement of that star, but we don’t need to. There is so much truth in this story that we just can’t ignore it. There is something so foreign, yet so familiar about it. And here it is: We are a people on a journey.

We are the wise men. We often feel like awkward outsiders who journey through life in search of Christ in the world; we carry with us gifts that we seek to lay beside the Christ Child.

Let us pause and think together about the gifts we bring to the Christ Child.

Our GOLD –in the time of these Wise Men, Gold was a symbol of earthly kingship – a thing to be highly treasured.

My question for you is this:

What do you treasure in this world?

Our Myrrh - an embalming oil; a symbol of death.

What do we need to let go of in order to follow the star to Jesus this year?

Write your answer on a slip of paper and come and place that in the “fire” – let it go so that you may focus on the signs of God’s love and grace in your life.

And finally, our frankincense – an incense; a symbol of godliness.

As we seek to follow Christ this year, let us take up a new spiritual discipline – a guided exercise of watchfulness and practice. You are invited to come forward and select a Star Work at random from the basket. This word will become yours to live with during the coming year – your own star if you will. It is an invitation to be attentive to God in a particular way.

To leave some space in your life empty so that you have time and space to be watchful for how God might be moving in and through you.

Come and receive your Frankincense, your Star Word, to help you approach God in a new way this year.

Let us pray

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way. *Home By Another Way*, Page 28