

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

“Light in the House of Bread”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Epiphany

“We, Three Kings of Orient Are” says the great Epiphany hymn. Epiphany Sunday, in the Christian liturgical year, remembers the visit of the Magi (*magoi*) to Jesus. This is the end of the “Twelve Days of Christmas” (as the song says) that constitutes the season. The Birmingham News actually had an excellent article on Epiphany in yesterday’s Religion section, quoting such superb scholars as Marcus Borg. I was pleased to see the treatment of the season.

Why a special day about this, when we don’t have a special day about, say... Mary visiting Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist), or Jesus being presented in the Temple? I think it is because of *who* – in the broadest sense – these Magi were, and who they represent within the very intentional structure of Matthew’s Gospel.

So who were these guys? “We, Three Kings of Orient Are” is probably the worst line in that great hymn, because they weren’t kings. (Although one of the early patristic writers said of the magi that they were *like* kings.) From the Biblical text we don’t know if there were three of them. Early Christian tradition sometimes imagined there were 12, twelve being one of those important symbolic numbers in scripture. We only know there were three gifts named, and so we construe three Magi. Sometimes we say “wise men” instead of kings, and that’s closer to what the word Magi would have meant. More, they were astrologers, what would have been – in that day – scientific professionals. No mention is made of the manger; it says they entered the house and knelt down to pay him homage. Some scholars think they arrived a couple of years after the birth, and for whatever reason, Joseph and Mary had settled there at that point.

Our image of this event is influenced by years of church Christmas pageants, nativity sets, and myriad Christmas cards – showing three exotic eastern “Kings”, on camel back, crossing sand dunes and coming on Bethlehem. Of course there are no sand dunes anywhere near Bethlehem, and camels are never mentioned in this account from Matthew. At some point, tradition gave them the names Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar – which is also not in Scripture but first shows up in a mosaic in 6th century Ravenna. The characters Caspar and Melchior are about as historically sound as Rudolph and Frosty.

So, back to the question “who were these guys” and why does Matthew want us to know this story? They were astrologers, most likely, Gentiles, nameless strangers. The star seems to have heralded for them the birth of a great ruler, and they brought appropriate gifts to celebrate that. Perhaps they were even diplomats, sent from the Persian (or somewhere) government to make early peace with the great king being born. And they don’t come to Bethlehem, they follow the star and come to Jerusalem, and got a surprise. Instead of a King joyfully celebrating the birth of a son, they find Herod, who is not sly enough to deceive them in the end. They don’t know local politics or they never would

have said to Herod: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They may have expected a party celebrating the birth of the royal heir, and instead were greeted with fear and suspicion.

When they found the child they knelt and gave homage to him, gave their gifts, and being onto Herod by now went another way home. Most who have pored over this text think Matthew meant us to believe a double meaning here – that they went home changed. They were open to new wisdom and truth; more than that, they searched for it.

Just about everything in this story is filled with symbolic meaning and metaphor. The star that rises calls us back to the Old Testament (and that’s where the kings and camels come from). Isaiah 60 : “Arise, shine, for your light has come... nations shall come to your light and kings will come to the brightness of your dawn... a multitude of camels shall cover you... they shall bring gold and frankincense.” The light in the story is the one the prophet imagined calling *all* the nations to Jerusalem. Gospel writer John called Jesus the “Light of the world”, and Matthew thinks the same way in linking the Isaiah prophecy to the Magi’s trip to see Jesus.

But not to Jerusalem, and there’s the next symbol. To Bethlehem, a town that had become its own metaphor. The City of the great King David. Of whom another prophet said: “You, O Bethlehem Ephratha, least in the land of Judah, from you shall come a ruler for my people Israel.” And more, Matthew listed the genealogy (of Joseph) in Chapter 1 and broke tradition by listing women in the lineage, 3 of whom were Gentiles, especially Ruth, the great grandmother of King David. Beth-lehem translates as the “house of bread.” Later than the Magi’s visit, Jesus took bread and broke it and likened it to his body, given for the life of the world. Bethlehem, the House of Bread, is its own symbol.

When the Magi came, they brought gifts, yet another symbol. Much has been made of the particulars of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some say gold is a gift for a King, frankincense would be used by the priest in the Temple and myrrh, often used for anointing the dead for burial, foretold Christ’s death for us. Who knows? Here’s another possible meaning of the gifts – in Isaiah 60, the gifts that the nations will bring to Zion are not just gold and frankincense, but the sons and daughters of Zion, who have been scattered abroad. Another symbol, another metaphor, wrapped up in this story. Light, bread, gifts.

We could play with the scriptural references forever, but here, I think, is the point. Matthew, who was generally writing for an audience of Jewish Christians, makes the point that God broke God’s own rules – or a least what had been thought to be God’s rules. Women are cited in the genealogy, and Gentile women at that. The contrast is made between rejection of the born Messiah, and violence, by the ruler of Judea, and acceptance and worship of him by Gentile strangers. Not just any Gentile strangers, but astrologers – an activity pretty much forbidden by Jewish religion.

A new world has been described in this tale, in very concise language. A new king has been born to us, to most unlikely parents, in a most unlikely place, and was visited by the most unlikely envoys from far away. The people who were at the party were the ones you would not have expected to be there, had you been one of Matthew's first readers. And they knelt and paid him homage. When he wrote this, do you suppose Matthew had seen Paul's letter to the Philippians: "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord..."? A new sort of "King", a different sort of rule, new people at the party.

Herod was frightened and enraged, and his reaction was deadly... last week's sermon talked about what happened next- the massacre of the innocents. Herod was right to be afraid and angry. His time was up.

When the church gets it right, we remember this lesson, of the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles – Epiphany, we call it. When the church gets it right, we remember that God broke what everyone thought were the rules, and invited new people to the party. When we have gotten it wrong, we have tried to keep the party to ourselves. So we might well ask who the modern-day "gentiles" are?

I think we got it right when we decided to have open communion at the Lord's table, remembering that Jesus Christ is host at the table, and who would we be to turn away anyone Jesus may be calling there. When we get it right, we act out the invitation David Ramage used to use – "We welcome those whom Jesus welcomes." All you gentiles, all you magi, come to the table. When we get it right, the barriers that divide the friends of Jesus will come down. When we get it right, we will measure our faith not by an increase in activity but by an increase in grace.

If enough of us Christians get it right, maybe a new year will start in Birmingham where we don't have 4 murders in the first 5 days. Maybe we'll have none, and that will be our offering to the new ruler, the Christ child, and that will be our myrrh. If enough of us Christians get it right, maybe a new year will come where everyone who wants it has heat and a roof overhead, and where no child in our community has to go to bed hungry, and can come home from school and smell dinner cooking, maybe bread, and what they smell will be frankincense. If enough of us get right, maybe a new year will come when fear and suspicion is banished, and there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female, but all are one in Christ Jesus, heirs of Abraham according to promise (*Gal. 3:28*), and all are welcome at the table of the Lord. And that will be pure gold. And the people who walk in darkness will see a great light. And follow it.