

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman  
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
January 6, 2018 Epiphany/C  
Texts – Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 Matthew 2:1-12

Once every six years the Feast of the Epiphany falls on a Sunday, as it does this year. And when it does, we get to hear that part of the Christmas story from Matthew's gospel depicted visually in most familiar crèche scenes, the visitation of the wise men from the east. They are sometimes referred to as the "magi." Loosely translated, they are astrologers; but not of the sort that we know from the horoscope page in the newspaper. They are sages, seers, people who understand that there are many layers of meaning underlying the common events of this world; and whose task is to shed light on that meaning for all the world to see.

These wise men take their place as part of the wondrous story of the birth of Jesus. Somehow they learn, perhaps through their reading of the night skies, that something significant has occurred in a distant land. So they follow the eastern star, travel many miles with gifts to offer just in case, not knowing exactly who or what they might encounter. When they finally meet the infant Jesus, they fall on their knees and worship. They see something in him. They know something. And they worship.

But there is more to this story than what we hear in church on this day. There are more characters than just the wise men, Jesus and his adoring parents. There is in fact a dark side to this story, and that dark side has to do with King Herod, who is very much a part of the events here. We learn the fuller story when we read beyond the appointed passage for today. Herod's response to the news of Jesus' birth is directly opposite the response of the wise men. Herod is not filled with wonder and awe, but rather fear and jealousy. He does not travel to see the baby, but rather sends out his minions to try to track down his whereabouts. And of course, he has no interest in paying homage, but rather lashes out in a violent massacre. In a particularly gruesome act, Herod focuses his terror on the littlest children living in and around Bethlehem in an effort to eliminate what he perceives to be a threat. "And a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." The Church commemorates that horrible event each year on December 28<sup>th</sup>, known as Holy Innocents Day.

Our story today gives us an insight into the mind of Herod, and the mind of every tyrant who has ever lived, leaders who are driven by fear rather than wonder, love, and praise. To Herod, Jesus is a potential threat to his power. Jesus is a problem that must be conquered, eliminated, snuffed out.

The wise men's response could not be more different. To them, Jesus is a wondrous gift, the one who sheds light on the Divine mystery. Isaiah provides an image for those in every land who would seek God: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." The fact that the wise men are not Jews, but rather people from outside the covenant community is significant. These gentiles are able to recognize the light of Christ and see its significance for the whole world. They are the ones who reflect the light.

Who are the wise people in our day? Whom do we trust to see and reflect the light of God in the midst of so much darkness? To whom do we look for guidance to help penetrate the divine mystery?

I wonder if many people even bother to ask these kinds of questions any more. We have become a culture enamored with problem-solvers, people who know how to fix what's broken, or build a better widget, or eliminate threats, or just plain make us feel better. Our gurus generally are the computer wiz, the master plumber, the brilliant general, and the therapist. And believe me, I know how much we need folks who can solve a computer problem, fix a leaky faucet, protect our nation, or untie the knots of the inner child. Who will fix the problem of a dysfunctional government? I suggest all of them be made to sit in a Pre-School class one morning where they can hear a lesson about cooperation and how to share toys! No doubt we need folks who can offer real solutions to real problems.

Yet we live not only in a world of problems to be solved and threats to be eliminated, but also in a world of wonder to be explored. God is the ultimate mystery. And mystery is not a problem to be solved. It is a never ending invitation to live into, to probe, to delight in. The wise people are those who invite the rest of the world into that delight, just as the magi do in our story this morning. They are the ones who help us see that there is always more than what meets the eye. There is God in the flesh, God in and among us, even in a newborn infant.

The Church at its best provides a context for wisdom to take root and flourish. The difficult work of the church is not to solve people's problems, but to shed light on mystery, to open us up to the wondrous presence of God. And to the extent that we humans are created in the image of God, it's also to open us up to the mystery in one another. The message of Christmas is not that God will solve our problems. The message of Christmas is that God is with us. I think the job of the Church, of this parish, is to help people see the world and one another in the light of Christ, and equip us to respond to that world and one another with compassion, conviction and wisdom. I believe we have been doing that over the past three years as we've walked together in discovery and ministry. We have been opening our eyes more widely and tuning our ears more keenly to God who is with us here and in the community. We have committed to follow in the footsteps of the wise men. We know that our mission starts with falling on our knees. It starts with reverence to God incarnate. It starts with worship.

"When the wise men 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."