

Epiphany Sunday  
January 6, 2008

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12*

It is only when Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, falls on a Sunday that we have as our texts the story of the Wise Men's homage to the baby Jesus. The traditions that have grown up around these guys is pretty rich. Somewhere along the way they came to be known as Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar. Though where that tradition came from, I have no idea. Some call them kings. Though we don't know that for sure.

Tradition has it that there were three of them, though that is probably only because three different gifts are named. We don't even know for sure that they were all men. What we do know is that they were wise ones, seekers. They had come from faraway to pay homage to a newly born Jewish king. Ever wonder why? Why would they have even been interested in such a thing?

It makes me wonder what was their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. The text doesn't tell us exactly where they were from. But could it be that they were from places where the children of Israel had been during the time of the Exile, the time when the prophet Isaiah was writing about this new servant king? Were there others who knew of and awaited the Messiah who would usher in a kingdom of such justice and compassion that nations would look to it as the example of what was possible for a society. It's hard to imagine what impact the words of Hebrew Scripture had in the days of Jesus outside of the land of Israel and Judah.

But the Wise Ones lived in the sinful human world just like everyone else. They may have been in different countries with different cultures, or traditions, or religions, but the same human dynamic probably applied. It existed nearly everywhere in those days, as it exists nearly everywhere in our day: the rich and powerful have the best that life has to offer, often at the expense of the poor and powerless; and the poor and powerless suffer and struggle just to get by. The Wise Ones, in their role as part of the king's court might have had an interesting perspective of both worlds, and reason to wonder if there wasn't some other, better way. And if, in the words of prophets like Isaiah they found some basis for hope for such a day, such a king. Maybe along with every other person who wasn't a king, they longed for the King of the Jews who would bring about the Isaiah vision of a just society to which all the other nations will stream.

There is a strong recurrent theme in the words of the prophets, especially evident in Isaiah. This is the inter-connection between justice, prosperity and peace. Over and over we are told that justice for the powerless and compassion for the poor and needy precedes lasting prosperity and peace. If a nation was lucky enough to have a good and righteous king, one who was strong enough to fend off greedy and corrupt adversaries and usurpers, that nation might have a chance for prosperity and peace. That kind of prosperity and peace that brings other nations streaming to it to learn, how do you do that? Obviously, having that kind of good king didn't happen very often. Maybe that's

why the Wise Ones from the east searched the dark night sky in the first place, searching for some sign of hope, some sign of light in a dark and sinful world.

I wonder what their conversation must have been like on the long trip to the land of Judah. What were they expecting to find. My hunch is they thought they were going to be meeting royalty. Gold and frankincense certainly are not the gifts to give to peasants. They went first to Jerusalem, the seat of power. And then to Bethlehem, a little town, long past its' glory days as the city of David. That's where they found the baby Jesus. But not in a royal palace. All the manger scenes have the wise men showing up at the dirty, drafty, smelly cattle shed. (The text actually says they were in a house by then).

Either way, these foreign travelers did not find Jesus in a position of power. He was among the common people. His father, not a landowner, not even well-off enough to own a fishing boat and nets – only a carpenter. I've got to believe that the Wise Ones went back home wondering "how in the world might the son from such poverty be a King?" How might one with such humble beginnings be able to bring about the just and compassionate nation that would be the light to all nations? How indeed?

Do you suppose the Wise Ones went home feeling their trip had been a phenomenal waste of time? Or do you suppose that in those few moments in the presence of baby Jesus they might have been able to catch just a glimpse of God's possibilities, just a moment or two of open-ness to the possibility that God was up to something brand new. Did they get, indeed, do we get that God was tired of trying to get kings and rulers to be just and compassionate. The prophets God had sent to teach and admonish those hard-hearted rulers had been ignored, mistreated, even killed. Now it was time to play by different rules. To change the game altogether.

And so it was that God's power was veiled, and Jesus was born. Wise Ones looked on. Did they see? Were they able to see past the 1<sup>st</sup>-century equivalent of a poor baby, born to un-wed parents, in a garage in a third-world country? It is only once the types of power that we think of as powerful – things like wealth, position, might – are out of the way, could God show us the types of power that are truly transformative: compassion, forgiveness, hope, love, faith, courage, boldness.

Unfortunately, the simple fact of the matter is that our sinful world is addicted to the world's idea of power: might, wealth, position. I am presently reading the trilogy by Phillip Pullman. It includes "The Golden Compass" which has just been made into a movie. At the December conference pastors' meeting we got into a discussion of the movie. Apparently there is a flap about it among folks in the religious right. So, I figured I should read it myself to see what all the fuss is about.

I am about halfway through the last book, and so far, I find nothing redemptive in it whatsoever. (And I am starting to agree with the opinion that the flap might have just been a ploy to get more folks to so see the movie.) Not so different, I think, from what the Left Behind series are said to be like. What I find disturbing about it is that it is the same old story, killing is part and parcel of the story, killing is ultimately the way out of every conflict, the way of arriving at the hoped-for-end. Same old story. Same old ideas of power, since killing, to take life, is the ultimate expression of our version of power.

In Jesus, God was writing a new story. In the most personal, hands-on kind of way, God was introducing us to a different kind of power. The simple fact of the matter is that you can't force someone to love, or to forgive, to show compassion, to have faith or courage. You can only guide, encourage, support, call them to such behavior. That's what God, in Christ Jesus, was doing.

Jesus called his followers to lives of compassion and forgiveness, boldness and hope as they carried his message to all nations. The message to love God and love your neighbor, the message to forgive as you have been forgiven, the message to welcome the stranger, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. That's when the light of Christ dawns in the world: each instance, each moment someone offers even a cup of water in Jesus' name. That's when Jesus' power is made known.

2000 years later, few of us could name more than two or three caesars of the Roman empire, but all the nations of the world know something of Jesus. We may not always get it right. Some people may know only a sadly distorted image of this Jesus. But his light still shines in the darkness, wherever sin and despair cover our hearts and obscure our hopes. Through Christ we know of God's forgiveness and through forgiveness we have hope. There is nothing, no conflict, no hatred, no division, that the forgiveness and love of God that is ours through Jesus cannot mend. The Light of Christ still shines in the darkness. And the darkness still cannot overcome it. TBTG. Amen.