

Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2019
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Why are there **three** richly dressed visitors in the manger scene in front of the altar and on our front lawn? After all, St. Matthew makes **no** mention of the **number** of “*wise men from the East* [who] *came to Jerusalem*” (Matt. 2:1). Answer: people **assumed** there were **three** wise men because there are **three** gifts mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:11). Although they remain anonymous in Scripture, later tradition dubbed the wise men Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. There’s a tradition that on Epiphany (January 6, this Sunday) one uses chalk to inscribe the year, 2019, and the initials CMB over the lintel of your home, to indicate that those who live there worship the Christ, as the wise men did.

Maybe **because** they’re called “the wise men,” the magi are a target for humor and take a lot of guff in religious cartoons and even on some Christmas cards. I have a few favorites ☺. One shows three regal men bearing the traditional gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Mary’s response is, “No diapers????” The caption is: “The First and Last Male Sponsored Baby Shower.” Another is a picture of three women approaching the manger with arms full of gifts. Bubble captions over their heads announce what they’re bringing: “fresh diapers”; “casseroles for the week”; “lots of formula.” Under the picture is the explanation: “After the Three Wise Men left, the Three Wiser Women arrived.” Then there’s the cartoon of two magi, flanked by their camels, holding their gifts. They’re reporting back to the third one, “Right, we’ve picked up the gold and the myrrh... what on earth is THAT?!” The last fellow is holding Frankenstein by the hand.

Often we use humor to break tension and yes, there’s some very serious stuff going on in today’s Gospel. We hear that these otherwise **wise** men naively explain to King Herod that they

seek “*the child who has been born the king of the Jews,*” because they want to “pay him homage” (Matt. 2:2). That’s a big error in judgment, because Herod is known to swim in a sea of paranoia and certainly is going to do whatever he has to in order to eliminate the competition. We already know the rest of the story: Herod’s horrific response is to order the slaughter of the innocents, the murder of any male children two years and younger in Bethlehem and vicinity. Jesus is safe because an angel warns Joseph in a dream to take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt. They won’t return till after the death of Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas whom the adult Jesus will call “that sly fox,” and who ordered the beheading of John the Baptist.

The word translated as *paying homage* is interesting. It literally means to bow down with one’s forehead to the ground. The same word is used by St. Matthew for the posture of a leper who comes to Jesus, asking for healing (Matt. 8:2), prostrate before Him. It’s ironic that Herod, who identified as a Jew (though he was a poor one, at that), rejects and seeks to murder Jesus, while the Gentile/pagan magi come to adore Him. The beauty of this passage is that it fulfills the promise that Israel will be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6c). The goyim, the Gentiles, share in the salvation God has sent to and through the chosen people of Israel. That salvation is revealed in the Savior, the Child born of Mary, whom the magi have come to adore. *Epiphany* means showing forth. God’s love is broadcast, made manifest, writ large, in Jesus the Christ.

The gifts of the magi acknowledged the Gift of God in Jesus Christ. **Gold** was the gift fit for a king. **Frankincense** was the only source of perfume used in the Temple, dried tree gum burnt to become divine fragrance, holy smoke, rising up as visible prayer to God. Christ means *anointed one*, and the **myrrh** one of the magi brought was used to anoint the high priest (check it out in Exodus 30:23-33), as well as to anoint the dead. Jesus, who was crucified and died then became

our Great High Priest (cf. letter to the Hebrews). The gifts the magi brought, then, weren't just indicative of who the Child already was, but who He would become.

This Savior, our Christ, saves us from our sins, including the sin of the hate-filled, fear-driven divisions among us. Remember the verse from Revelation 22 (Rev. 22:2c), which we sing during Holy Week in the hymn *There in God's Garden?*

... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Who would disagree that there's too much "us and them" in the world today? I recently read an article about the Italian undersecretary of culture stonewalling a request from the Louvre for a loan of paintings by Leonardo da Vinci to be included in a special exhibit marking the 500th anniversary of his death in 2020. The undersecretary is basically saying, "He's **ours**, not yours!" A concern was expressed that people will think da Vinci was French, not Italian. REALLY?? 'Sounds like a good example of higher-ups not playing well in the sandbox. There are other examples of nationalism right here at home that are much more harmful than mere withholding of artwork.

Revelation echoes our 1st lesson from Isaiah and our Epiphany Gospel when it says:

And the [heavenly] city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. (Rev. 21:23-26)

We don't actually know how many wise men there were, whether they were astrologers, Persian priests, or kings, what star they followed, exactly when they arrived. But we do know they were wiser than Herod, for they knew Who was worthy of worship and they rerouted the journey of their lives to find Him. Here's the end of T.S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi*:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.¹

Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of our ELCA, has said that in Holy Baptism we've already died the only death that counts. Even in one as young as Baby Jack Christian, baptized this weekend, baptism isn't just a **washing**; it is a **dying** of the old self and the **birthing** of a new creation in Christ. Something in us invisibly but miraculously **changes** when we are mystically washed, sacramentally drowned in those baptismal waters. According to the Father's plan, our Lord Jesus' death and resurrection **save** us. Lifelong their Holy Spirit **sanctifies** us, makes us holy, knocks off the rough corners, scrubs us clean on the washboard of grace, raises us up from failures in love and from random humiliations, heals us from trauma, redirects us to love and serve the Trinity and the children of God, whoever they are, wherever they live, whatever they look like and believe.

The magi were on a sacred journey and so are we. Bethlehem is just one stop. Here's what Frederick Buechner has to say:

...home for the... wise men and for us is not the manger where the light is gentle and God is a child. Peace is there, the peace that passes all understanding, but it is not to be ours yet for a while. We also must depart into our own country again, where peace is not found in escape from the battle but in the very heat of the battle... Bethlehem is not the end of our journey but only the beginning – not home but the place through which we must pass if ever we are to reach home at last.²

Amen.

¹T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), p. 70.

²Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat* (NY: Seabury, 1966), p. 56.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham