

“It Takes More than Hope”

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

Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2007

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The world seems a bit out of whack lately. There is no snow. The temperatures are much higher than they should be this time of year. The grass is growing when it shouldn't. The cherry blossom trees are blooming in Washington. On Thursday I passed a golf course with more than a few cars in the parking lot and men getting ready to play one more round. Things just are not as they should be. So this morning perhaps it is not so unusual to hear of the Magi's journey to find the baby Jesus one week after we were worried about Jesus' preadolescent disappearing act in the temple.

Today we celebrate Epiphany. We complete our Advent/Christmas journey with the story of the Magi's journey to find a king. As you drive through town you see fewer lights in the windows of homes and more spent Christmas trees waiting for their final disposal. We seem time to bring this season to a close for another year.

On Christmas Eve it was not the Magi that told us of this amazing thing taking place, but it was the shepherds. For no logical reason they left their sheep and followed the angel's instructions to find the place where the Christ child was born. The shepherds were not at all clear about what they had seen or heard that night, but their hearts were filled with joy. They seemed to know deep inside that their lives had changed that night, that their world was a different place, something new was taking place right before their eyes.

As this story was unfolding in the fields of Palestine, another story was developing farther away. The Magi—wise men we sometimes call them—began their journey east asking strange questions along the way. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We have followed his rising star and we have come to give him honor.”

Who are these strange men? Where are they from? Who told them to come and why were they asking these bizarre questions? Of course, to the Magi none of this seemed strange at all. They did not understand the whole story, but they trusted enough to answer this call to find the one who would be King, the one who would change everything. When the local folk start hearing about these foreigners arriving in their little town, asking absurd questions, you can imagine how the authorities might have reacted. King Herod was a little shaken up by it all. He schemes to have the Magi help him locate this child. What could be happening, they wonder; angels, shepherds and now foreigners bearing expensive gifts. Perhaps Herod does have something to worry about.

When they find the child they present their gifts and fall on their knees to worship him. Like the shepherds on the hillside, they begin to realize that something is changing in their world, a new thing is happening, a new world is being born. In a dream they receive a warning not to return the way they have come and escape King Herod before giving him the information he so desperately desires. Still another angel warns Mary and Joseph

to take the baby and escape south to Egypt until Herod is dead and their return home is safe.

We love the story of the Magi. No Christmas pageant would be complete without a visit from the Magi. The story is so familiar that the point Matthew is making in telling it may get lost to those of us who have heard it so many times before. This is a story of great faith, of trusting in God's Spirit to lead you into the presence of God. It is yet another story about how God uses the most unexpected people to announce the coming of the kin-don.

Matthew was telling this story to new believers. He is the only gospel writer to include this part of the story. Matthew was already concerned that Christians were too easily drawing unnecessary boundaries around who was in and who was out, who was welcome in the community and who was not. Matthew wanted to remind this new Christian community why God had sent Jesus to be born among us. The coming of the Christ child was for all people. That is why Matthew includes the Magi.

Whether you call them wise men or philosophers or even astrologers, the point that Matthew is trying to make is that whoever they were and wherever they were from, they are not from here; these are not hometown folks, with hometown values, or a hometown upbringing. They are odd fellows from some foreign land, the kind of people the Scriptures have often warned others to stay away from. The first hearers of Matthew's story would have been suspicious of these visitors, wondering why they had come, what was the purpose of these extravagant gifts. What did they think they were doing? What business did they have coming to worship "their" king?

This is precisely why Matthew tells this story. The fact that God chose to take on flesh and dwell among God's people is truly amazing. However, this story of God's incarnation is more than angelic announcements, wise men bearing gifts and foiling King Herod's evil intentions by going home another way. Matthew wants this new Christian community to understand that the saving word of God, in fact, the very death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not for some, but for all. Not for men only, but for women too. Not for those who live unblemished lives, but for those whose lives bear the scars of unmentionable pain. Not for the hometown crowd alone, but for people from the other side of the tracks, or the inner city or some isolated village half a world away. Not for people who believe just like we do or worship just like we do or sing the hymns that we do or pray the prayers that we do, but for those who are struggling to believe anything at all, or those who seemed to have lost their faith.

This is why Jesus has come to dwell among us. God sent the Magi to find the king. They brought gifts worthy of the one God had sent to redeem the world; gold fit for a king, frankincense, to announce his priestly intentions and myrrh, to foreshadow his death. The Magi did not know the whole story as Matthew's community did. They did not understand why they were making this journey to find a child promised to save the world. However, they left their own homes to fulfill the will of God. They were not Jewish men. They were not even religious men. They were Gentiles. However, in choosing them, God

reminds us that from the very beginning the saving word of God has been and will be available to all people.

The story of the Magi affirms for us what we already know to be true, that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. God desires for us to be in community. There is never anything that can separate us from God's love, nothing that would make us unacceptable in this community. Nothing we have done that is irredeemable. Nothing. This is the message of Christmas that lingers long after the symbols of the season have been packed away.

Some years ago, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York plastered the city with posters of the altar of St. Patrick's Cathedral lavishly decorated for Christmas. It was a warm and inviting sight. The poster's caption was simple; "Come Home." No matter where you've been or who you have been with, no matter what you've been up to or how long you have been away, "Come Home."

This is the invitation in today's gospel, "Come Home." Make the journey back to where you belong, where it is okay to wonder, or doubt, where it is okay to be human and to act inhuman at times, to be without the answers to those most abiding questions and to share you the wisdom God has given you with others. God calls us to follow the way of the Magi, to listen to the leading of that still small voice from within, to seek guidance along the way and to trust that God has in mind for you a very special destination. The Magi did more than simply hope they would complete their journey. They trusted that if God had sent them, God would get them where they needed to go. Like Mary, the most important thing is not that they were chosen, but that they were willing to respond, willing to go wherever God might send them, to be part of the unfolding mystery of God. God invites us to follow that same star and trust it will guide us home, to the very place where we too will find the Christ child. May it be so! Amen

Source: "Come Home" by the Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander, *Day 1*, 2002.