

DAY OF THE EPIPHANY, 2018

PRINCE OF PEACE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN, POLAND / CHRIST LUTHERAN, STRUTHERS

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

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.*

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.*

OK – here’s a little quiz for you. 1) According to the Bible, how many wise men came from the East? (the Bible doesn’t say). 2) According to the Bible, what were their names? (the Bible doesn’t say). 3) According to the Bible, they found the child in a manger. (the Bible doesn’t say).

You get the picture. A lot of what we think we know about the wise men comes not from our Bible, but from legends and traditions handed down from generation to generation. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing. In our own families we hand down stories in the same sort of way. It is a good way to remember. Still, there are times when the legends can get in the way of the truth. In fact, the very term “wise men” really doesn’t stand up to scrutiny when we study the oldest manuscripts of our Greek New Testament.

I don’t understand why the translators of the New Revised Standard Bible actually chose to use the phrase “wise men” for the Greek word *magi*. I mean, what were they thinking? They have simply added to the misconception of who these people were, and made it twice as hard for us to understand the importance of these particular folks who were looking for and worshipping Jesus.

Think about your image of wise men. The term tends to present an image of clever, thoughtful people who are well respected by their peers. Maybe they are people who work at those “think tanks” in Washington D.C., or they are honored leaders of organizations. Their opinions are sought in important matters.

This past Monday I was a participant in the annual Emancipation Proclamation Service held at New Bethel Baptist Church. As part of the service they presented the annual Powell Heritage Award named after the late Rev. Elizabeth Powell, a beloved community treasure of the Youngstown area. It’s clear she was a wise woman as well as being well-respected.

The man who received this year’s award is Dr. Morris W. Lee, who has served as pastor at Third Baptist Church in Youngstown for over 50 years. It’s clear he is a wise man who is well-respected and honored for his contributions to the community.

On the other hand, the *magi* of the Bible were not necessarily well-respected or honored. They were astrologers, looking for signs in the stars. Our modern words magic and magician have their roots in that word *magi*. As far as the Jews and the early Christians, were concerned, *magi* were foreigners, and pagans who wouldn’t know God if God were to appear right in front of them. They were considered fools. And they weren’t treated very well.

If you’ve ever read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, or even seen the Disney version, you might recall that it begins on January 6, with the Feast of Fools. That was the way they celebrated Epiphany -- a day on which they celebrated the Manifestation, the revelation of God in the Flesh, to the *magi*, the fools. People rejoiced because they knew that if God had revealed God’s son to such foolish ones as the *magi*, God would surely reveal God’s self to them.

It wasn’t until after the Middle Ages, during the Age of Enlightenment, that people began to refer to these *magi* as “wise men”. Do you know why? These “enlightened” people refused to believe that God would have chosen fools as ones to encounter the Christ child. Surely God would have revealed himself to the upper crust of society first? Or, at the very least, the educated. People in the know would have been the first to know, right?

That, of course, was exactly the point in Matthew’s gospel. The people who should have been aware of the coming of the Messiah missed it completely. The chief priests and scribes knew the scriptural

references to the coming of the Messiah, but they didn't do anything about it, even when opportunity literally knocked on their door. Instead, along with Herod and all of Jerusalem, they were afraid.

We don't know why they were afraid. Maybe it was because they had received no direct word from God. Maybe it was because they knew that the arrival of the Messiah signaled an end to their way of life? The Messiah's coming certainly would signal a change for them, especially since the Messiah was understood to be the King of the Israelites. Maybe all of Jerusalem was afraid simply because Herod was afraid. And he might have been afraid that his comfy, cozy reign as the puppet king of Judea was about to end.

The people who should have been ready to welcome the coming Messiah were afraid. At best they simply didn't believe it. So, God sent the good news about the Savior of the world to those who would believe. First to shepherds watching their flocks by night -- an undeserving group if there ever was. Shepherds were rude, crude, and socially unacceptable. Not to mention uncouth. Yet, they believed and glorified the Lord. And they told others about this good news.

If the shepherds were at the shallow end of the gene pool, the magi weren't even in the water! I'm not sure that we can really grasp what that would have meant to first century people, that foreigners, who were pagans, were paying homage, worshipping, this child with his mother. But there they were - the magi - going where the wise refused to tread. Isaiah reported it long before: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

So, what does this all mean for us, today? What does it mean for us to know that it wasn't wise men looking for Jesus, but astrologers, fools, magi? What does it mean that these magi were from the East, far outside of the boundaries of the chosen people of God?

It means that God has made Himself available to all peoples. It means that God has placed no limits for whom the good news is revealed. Just as those who were not a part of the Chosen Hebrew People were allowed to catch sight of the Incarnation of God. So also today, are people throughout the world, in all walks of life, given the opportunity to receive the Good News that Jesus is God in the flesh, and that because of his death and resurrection no one is outside of the grace of God.

There are, sadly, people who choose to reject that grace, and all we can do for them is to continue to pray for God to open their hearts. We can continue to serve as a witness for them of God's love and faithfulness. But, for those who encounter the Word of God and believer, there is great joy. There is the opportunity to worship, and to confess that Jesus is Lord. There is the opportunity to repent of one's sins, and to know the joy of God's forgiving grace.

The good news for us is the same good news for the rest of the world: If God has magi -- foreigners and pagans -- come as the first to recognize and give Jesus the proper respect as the King of Jews, we should know that there is nothing in our lives that would keep God from bringing us to Jesus. And, if there's nothing in our sinful lives to keep us away from Jesus, then there is nothing in the sinful lives of those other sinners we meet every day that will keep them away from Jesus.

So, here's some hard, and maybe harsh, questions for us to think about this coming week. Have you ever met someone whom you thought was not worthy of Jesus? Or, to put it another way, have you ever been surprised by the faith of someone whom you didn't think would know Jesus? Has there ever been anyone in your life who was so "alien" in his or her own way, that you didn't think they could receive God's gift of salvation? And how can we make sure that God's Word is proclaimed to all?

Things to think about as we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Amen.