

VESPERS SERMON Matthew 2: 1-12 What Can We Give Him?

You may have noticed that we haven't taken the banners down yet even most of us have already taken down our decorations at home. That's because it's Epiphany Sunday, the Sunday we celebrate the revelation of the Christ to the Gentiles in the wise men coming to Bethlehem to see the newborn King. We get to celebrate one more Sunday of Christmas.

Yesterday I read astronaut Bill Anders's description of what they saw as Apollo 8 orbited around the moon on Christmas Eve, in 1968. This is a picture Bill Anders took that evening. You can see the moon's surface at the bottom and the blue and white earth rising above. Bill noted that the divisions and borders we have built around earth's nations are not visible. It's all one great humanity on earth from that distance. But here's Bill's most interesting discovery as he looked out at the earth that day: He wrote,

"Another vision made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I held my fist at arm's length. That stunning vision {of earth} disappeared. From one lunar distance our world was easily obscured. At 10 lunar distances Earth would have been but the size of a ladybug. And at 100—then and now far beyond human reach—Earth would no longer be visible to the naked eye. Here was everything humans had been, everything we were, and everything we might become—and yet our home planet was physically insignificant in space."

And I thought, earth and humans **are** insignificant compared to the immensity and beauty of the world God created. And yet, John 3:16 tells us: *God so loved the world, including insignificant earth, including all humans of every nation, tribe, and language, that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him, anyone anywhere, in all the world, shall not perish but have everlasting life.* God's perspective on the earth and its people is the one Bill Anders saw in space. His love has no boundaries. God's perspective is seen clearly in today's Epiphany story through the eyes of some pretty unlikely people, foreigners in fact, who came to worship God's Son. Why would God use foreigners with strange religious and spiritual practices to give us God's perspective on earth?

There's a lot we could discuss in this story- we could talk about the special star that appeared, whether it's OK to look to the stars for guidance in life, about God speaking in dreams and whether we should expect God to speak through our dreams at night, or whether the magi found Jesus as an infant or a young child, in a stable or in a house. We could joke that if it had been three wise **women** following the star they would have brought more appropriate baby gifts! But today

I want to explore the question the wise men asked: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

Because if we really think about it, in our day, it’s a pretty strange question to ask. “The child who has been **born** to be king?” Does anyone here believe that people are **born** into their destiny? Only in a few countries where a monarchy rules are people still born to be king. We live in a democracy where leaders are not born, they’re elected, and young people are not stuck continuing in their family’s career. Ask people today and they’ll tell you they shape their own futures by choices they make. We also live in a culture which is largely secular and not religious. Our world is more likely to distrust a person supposedly born to be a religious king than to follow him. This story of our faith comes from a very different time and place and we shouldn’t be surprised that people around us doubt its validity.

The strange question of the magis is matched by the strangeness of the rest of the story. Who were the Magi? They were educated astrologers from the East, also educated in history, religion, prophecy, and astronomy. They studied the stars to find the answers to the questions of life—Who am I? Why am I here? What should I do? When the magi saw a special star appear for the first time in the night sky, they believed it meant that a great king had been born and they wanted to worship him because it was commonly believed then that kings were divine. Is it OK that stargazers who believed kings were divine are important people in Jesus’ story? Would **we** respect their beliefs today? The presence of these learned outsiders in the story of the birth of Jesus is different from anyone else in the story. Why are they here?

Matthew tells us that the magi came to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel, guided by the light of that new star and there they asked their strange question. It was about a 1,000-mile trip across desert and they expected to find excitement about the newborn king. Maybe even celebrations and parties with gifts. They came prepared with gifts fit for a king. But instead, they encountered a clash with authority. Herod and all Jerusalem with him were deeply disturbed at the very idea of a newborn king of the Jews. After all, Herod had been named King of the Jews by the Roman Senate and he had no newborn son! How dare they come to his land with their fanciful religious ideas, and threaten his power!

I find it comforting that people of faith today often face a similar challenge. The Citywell United Methodist Church in Durham, North Carolina, is a sanctuary church like several American Baptist churches in the Evergreen region are.

Sanctuary churches open their buildings and hearts to immigrants because their faith in Jesus leads them care for strangers, outcasts, and immigrants. Citywell church recently harbored an undocumented immigrant man from Mexico named Bruno, for almost a year while he awaited his case in immigration court. In that time Bruno became a beloved part of the church; he attended all services, helped with activities, he even preached there once, and taught them to sing some hymns in Spanish.

But last November, Bruno received a request from the Immigration office to come to the office and complete some further paperwork for his court case. His lawyers and members of Citywell church went with him only to watch him be arrested when he arrived. There was no intent to help his case; the authorities needed to have him outside the church to arrest him. The church members themselves were arrested as they blocked the van taking Bruno to detention singing Amazing Grace, and they called on the government to allow Bruno to follow the legal path available to him. But the immigration authorities had no more patience with having their authority challenged than Herod did.

Rob and I experienced our own clash with the government last year as we protested our government's inhumane separation of immigrant children from their parents at the border. Ten thousand of us stood outside the Tukwila detention center and sang songs, yelled our protests, waved our banners, prayed, and called out words of encouragement to the immigrant asylum seekers housed there. Many of them had no idea where their children had been taken. There were no arrests that day, but we were watched by armed guards. Why were we there? Because we believe our faith calls us to stand for the humane treatment of all people, even when standing means clashing with our government. It's not so different today.

Herod then called the Jewish scribes together, the expert teachers of Jewish scriptures, to find out where the Messiah was to be born and they reported in Bethlehem, the city of David. After all, if the babe born to be king of the Jews was not Herod's son, he wanted to know whose son was he, and where was he? So Herod sent the magi to Bethlehem where Matthew tells us they found the child with his parents.

Are you like me, do you wonder why the scribes didn't go to Bethlehem with the magi? Bethlehem was only 6 miles away, and yet none of the scribes went to find out whether their long-awaited Messiah had been born. Did they not believe the magi's story? Was it a challenge to their own authority? Did they assume that

if the Messiah had **really** been born, God would have told **them**, not these Gentile foreigners? God doesn't talk to foreigners, right? Whatever the reason, they missed the chance to see with their own eyes what the magi saw.

I've heard it said many times that God doesn't hear the prayers of nonChristians. Yet, here in this story of the birth of his Son, God spoke to and through these foreign men with a star, the holy scriptures, and a dream. Is it not possible that God did so in response to their prayers and faith, however odd they may seem to us? That God saw in them the willingness he needed to demonstrate that his Son came for the whole world. Just as God saw in the lowly shepherds just the kind of witnesses he needed. And as God saw in a simple peasant girl just the right woman to bear his Son. In each one, God saw a person with a heart like his own regardless of what they looked like on the outside. He didn't call the perfect or holy or the powerful; he called those with willing hearts. And we are reminded that it is sadly possible to believe the right things about God and not know God's heart at all.

It is said that God speaks loud enough for the willing soul to hear. And God was certainly speaking in this story. Speaking through a star, speaking through the prophet Micah, speaking through dreams, speaking through people no one imagined God would even care about. God was doing a lot of speaking. Some listened and others didn't. Can we hear the message of this Epiphany story- that God sent his Son out of love for the whole world, that no national, language, ethnic, or even religious boundary stops God's love? It's a message of good news for all people. And it reminds me of our question from Christmas Eve: Who are the people God is going to send into our lives this year? Perhaps people as different from us as the magi were from the scribes. Will we love them like God does no matter what they look like on the outside?

We sang a simple hymn a few moments ago that is based on a Christmas poem by Bethany Rosetti:

What can I give Him Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring Him a Lamb;
If I were a wise man, I'd sure do my part;
So what can I give Him? I'll give Him my heart.

Living out the Epiphany message of God's love for the whole world begins with the heart. The heart in scripture describes who we really are. The real us. Not just the nice us we present to others. When we offer God the real us, no matter

how broken and imperfect it is, God begins transforming us into the people he created us to be. Begins giving us his heart. So as you remain seated, let's sing that simple hymn as a prayer to prepare our hearts to receive the Lord's Table.

COMMUNION

At this table, we celebrate God's heart of love. Romans 5:8 tells us "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." These gifts of bread and wine help us never forget the lengths God will go to show his love for all mankind.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took bread, blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "This is my body broken for you. Eat it in remembrance of me."