

SUNDAY, January 7, 2024 EPIPHANY "Wise People Seek Jesus: Do You?"

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

Christmas morning a couple were awakened at 3 am by their middle child a boy of 3. He asked his mom for a pair of scissors to open one of his gifts. Not understanding what was going on, the mother got up and followed the boy to where the Christmas tree was. Underneath the tree was a disaster of wrapping paper and all the gifts opened up all over the floor. Meanwhile the couple's other two children heard the talking and came downstairs. They were quickly taken back to bed and fell asleep to await the wonder of Christmas morning. When asked why he opened all the presents, the boy answered that he "wanted to open all the presents so that nobody was "confused" and "they all knew what they had gotten." After a while, the young boy went back to bed and the parents got into the role of rewrapping the gifts of all except the middle child. They had run out of wrapping paper and he already knew everyone's gifts. The older child did not remember waking up in the night and had not recalled seeing all the gifts unwrapped. The parents worked hard to make sure Christmas morning was filled with surprises and it was. The parents learned also not to leave anything under the tree too early in the morning. The young boy was also taught about gift giving and what it is all about with its surprises. IT is also in the action of receiving and opening the gift that makes it even more special.

Gifts and sharing are what we remember about Christmas and special occasions in life. We often hear it's the thought that counts when we remember to be polite about gifts given and received. But what is important about gift giving goes back to what occurred in our reading from Matthew 2 with the wise men or Magi and their actions and encounters in Jerusalem and Bethlehem with people different from themselves. IT is also what is learned from the gifts offered that sets all those who celebrate Christmas into motion in order that we get that perfect gift for those whom we care about.

The prophet Isaiah wrote of the circumstances which would lead to the Messiah's coming and what would occur. From Isaiah 9 we read that the child who would be born would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and that it is through his authority there would be peace, justice and righteousness because the 'zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.' This zeal is defined as "a passionate ardor for any person or cause"; it is what God uses to accomplish His purposes for us. It was His intense devotion to and love for His people that drove the gift of His Son to come as a human baby into human history.

Isaiah all foretold his listeners of what to do when the Messiah did come. This is what was shared in our reading from Isaiah 60. We read "Arise shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. " This calls all who believe that Jesus came into the world to get up and do something! And Isaiah continues to state that all those who have fallen away from God will be gathered in from where they had scattered. Those who used to live in God's path will come together and they shall bring gifts of gold and frankincense and with these gifts they will also proclaim God's praise.

After Jesus was born a rallying cry was made by people far away to bring people together for the sake of the Messiah. But the people in Bethlehem, and in Jerusalem did not fully realize that the Messiah was in their midst. They needed people from away to tell them about the baby who was born in a stable and now living in a house with his parents. Some of the people knew—the shepherds and all whom they told about the infant in the barn near the

inn as they had seen the young family together. But not everyone paid attention because the Messiah was an infant and dependent upon parents for survival. Many people did not think that the Christ was yet born because they were still living in oppression, and in poverty. IF the Christ had come he would have brought immediate changes to the people and lead them towards a better life in the society of the time. But this did not occur.

The story continues in the Gospel of Matthew that we read about Joseph taking Mary as his wife knowing that she was pregnant with the messiah. Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem for registration and while there the baby is born. The baby is born in the stable, but being responsible parents, Mary and Joseph find suitable lodging. Mary is in no shape to travel again and so they stay in Bethlehem.

But in the meantime, astrologers- wise and learned men, saw a stranger star in their western sky and as they lived east of Jerusalem. Because the star was unusual, they decide to travel and see for it themselves this star which leads them in their search for the Messiah. They make their way by camels and it takes much time. They know that they won't see the baby right away because they cannot get there any faster. So they travel along together, camping stopping and going as they can, day after day. Finally they pull into Jerusalem and ask to those on the streets about their business, where can we find the King of Jews born not too long ago? They ask this to those on the street but do not get clear answers. They search for the Messiah without knowing what to do. To whom should they turn?

There is some concerns rising as they keep asking people about this new king. And when King Herod hears about this 'new king' he is frightened, and calls together the chief priests and scribes of the people. HE asks where this Messiah was to be born and he learns that it is Bethlehem. Herod then calls the wise men and asks them about the star that appeared, and then he sent them to Bethlehem. King Herod gives them the order to go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.

The Wise Men now under the direction of King Herod set out and ahead of them is the star which they had seen rise and continue to shine. It is this sign of the star that leads them to where the child was. This too was not a five minute ride but was 8.89 km or 5.52 miles.

Who were they -- these travelers from the mysterious East, who sometime after the birth of the baby arrive in Bethlehem with expensive gifts? They appear for a moment and are quickly gone. The text calls them wise men. They are known by various names, as magi, astrologers, astronomers, philosophers, mystics or scientists whose interests stretched far beyond Israel. Tradition has assigned them names and races as in the "We 3 Kings" song sung earlier. And by the gifts they brought this leads us to assume there were three wise men searching for the infant child.

But who they were, where they came from or what they were about remain buried in the mists of history and legend. Like all of us at our best, they were on a quest, hungry for light in a dark world, eager to find that which was greater than themselves. Their story is more than a pleasant tale. All we need to remember is that they were from a distance away and travelled this over land to see the boy. It would have taken them time to arrive at Joseph's doorstep after having been in Jerusalem. Joseph could have refused them entry, but he did not. There was a reason for these men to visit- They had been searching for him for a while, they knew that God

had promised the people a messiah and they wanted to see him for themselves. They were overwhelmed with joy!

After their learning about the messiah, they finally go to see Jesus a young child with Mary his mother. And in those moments time stands still. East meets West gifts are offered and received. Gifts that a child probably wouldn't be overjoyed seeing or getting up at 3am on Christmas morning just to be sure something was there! But gifts that indicated God's message of hope was now spreading far beyond Jerusalem and to people who were searching!

The gifts represent these Wise Men and their prayers for the Messiah who came to save His people. The gifts offered over two thousand years ago, gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth (in today's equivalents), six hundred, five hundred and four thousand dollars per pound, respectively. A similar gift today (frankincense and myrrh have declined in value, gold has increased) would set a 20th century king back six thousand dollars for the gold, but only fifteen dollars apiece for frankincense and myrrh. The Magi celebrated the Christ child with the most valuable items in the ancient world. But these gifts were not just of monetary value. They were also gifts of health and long life. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were among the earliest and most prized curative medicines in the ancient world. The Wise Men knew something about what was to occur with the Messiah that many people did not want to hear or understand.

The Magi searched for Jesus and it took time. Once they saw him, he was overjoyed! The message that the Messiah had been born to all people was definitely in play as these Wise Men came to see Him, and probably did not observe Jewish traditions. But something happened that day! They believed in the one they worshiped paying him homage to him in respect.

That night as they rested from their journey and visit with Jesus' family, they dreamed yes, but they were also warned not to return to King Herod. When they were ready to go back home, they went by a different route.

The Magi saw a star appear unlike any other in the sky. They knew of a promised Messiah as Isaiah had prophesied and these Wise Men chose to mount up on camels and go searching. They were in search of Jesus, the one born King of the Jews, but they did not fully yet know what was to take place. As the child was young and needed to grow in wisdom and strength and know human life experiences. The Magi took gifts to the One for whom the star appeared. They travelled a great distance to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in order to present the gifts better suited to one dying than a child. Yet the Messiah they knew would know death for the sake of His people. This was what was written in the ancient texts and in prophecy.

As we retell the story of the Wise Men and their search for Jesus, we might wish to ask what we are searching for as we begin 2024? What is it that God is leading us to do in these times? What is God asking us to search for – to learn about Jesus or to know him in new ways? Wise people are searching for answers to every day questions on how to live. We still are searching how best to live in peace. Many are hopeful that ceasefires and wars will end this year for all time, but when we read of missile testing with uncertain targets, we need to keep searching for how we as individuals and as a church family can share hope.

We seek to have joy that is eternal- the wise men were overjoyed at meeting Jesus and his parents. After their long journey they see the boy who will be the Messiah. They worship and honour him with gifts given in love. And their joy is complete. For Mary this is an experience of

joy as well for these Eastern visitors are the first to know about Jesus her son yet God's Son who is to be the Christ! Her joy overflows as well! But we must

We know that it is because of love that God gave us Jesus, and Jesus in turn dies for our sake, but how do we share this love we have for God Creator Christ and Spirit? How do we understand God's gift to us in Jesus?

We must continue to seek Jesus, find and experience his love and know in our hearts that He came to earth through Love for us all. His purpose will be revealed in time yet for us who know some of his story, we can rest assured that through Christ Jesus we will experience the wonder of God's glory someday. Wise people seek Jesus. The question to ask is how wise are you? And how willing are you to learn more about Jesus as Saviour, Lord, Messiah, Might God and Prince of Peace. Come let us bring our thoughts and desires about Christ before God in prayer.

Let us pray.

God of grace and love help us to know you and to search for Christ to be in our lives in new ways this New Year. Help us to arise and shine because Christ's light shines in us and for us.

Show us the path you would have us take. Lead us and guide us we pray. Amen.