

The Epiphany of Our Lord

January 5, 2014

Haven Lutheran Church

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

“Stopping in Bethlehem One More Time”

Tomorrow is the final day of Christmas, the festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord. We celebrate that festival today, on the Sunday closest to January 6th. For many of our Christian brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, the *Epiphany* is the day for gift exchange and feasts of food in celebration of our Savior’s birth. Last year I stood in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem as the Greek Orthodox congregation that shares that building began its Epiphany worship service. They were singing the opening portion of a liturgy without any instruments and their voices blended so beautifully. It was a holy moment that I wanted to savor but our tour guide only saw it as competition for the information he wanted to tell us. I just couldn’t understand why we weren’t stopping out of respect for their worship. I couldn’t understand why we weren’t letting the rich melodic praises of our Christian brothers and sisters wash over and into us.

The feast of the Epiphany is the day that we recall the LORD was revealed to gentile, foreign magi — wisemen who followed a star they believed announced the birth of a new king. Here we were in Bethlehem — foreigners, pilgrims who had also traveled many miles in search of God’s presence in the land where Jesus walked. Yet we went off to the side to listen to our guide talk *about* this site instead of stopping like those magi, like that congregation that was singing — to marvel and wonder.... and give our homage to our Lord, who came into that part of the world many years agoand still comes into lives today.

That experience last year convinced me that the feast of the Epiphany begs us each year to go one more time to Bethlehem before we leave the Christmas season. It asks us to stand before the manger a while longer and gaze into the face of God revealed. This Epiphany come with me on a journey with the magi to Bethlehem as imagined by

Barbara Brown Taylor.... and let the wonder lead us into this new year, down the new or other roads God maybe calling you, calling me, callings us to take.

“Once there were three very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each one of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

Each in his own country had tried books, tried magic, tried astrology and reflexology. One had spent his entire fortune learning how to read and write runes. Another lived on nothing but dried herbs boiled in water. The third could walk on hot coals but it did nothing for him beyond the great sense of relief he felt at the end.

They were all glad for a reason to get out of town — because that was clearly where the star was calling them, out — away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns. And so they set out, one by one, each believing that he was the only one with a star in his eye until they all ran into one another on the road to Jerusalem.

From a distance, each thought the other to be a mirage at first, a twinkling reflection made out of vapor and heat. But as they drew near to one another they saw the star they had in common and it was like a tattoo, or a secret handshake, that made them brothers before they spoke. They were unanimous that the star was leading them to Jerusalem, which made perfect sense, since they had every reason to believe they were on their way to meet a king.

They had no trouble gaining entrance to the palace. They looked rich, and that was enough to get them a royal audience, only the king they met was something of a

disappointment. He was old and fat and he had terrible breath. His skin was yellow, as if his bile had gotten the best of him, and the guards on either side of him shook so that their spears jingled against their shields. Without even conferring with one another, the wise men knew he was not the one, so they asked him if he knew of any other kings in the general area.

He had been picking at his fingernails until then, but their question seemed to get his attention in a big way. He looked right at them for the first time, and when he saw the stars in their eyes, his own eyes grew perfectly round, like the eyes of a snake. Asking the wise men if they would please excuse him for a moment, the king stepped into his chapel to confer with his clergy, who whipped out their concordances and told him what he wanted to know. Yes, there was a little something in the book of Micah about a new ruler for Israel, but nothing to get excited about. It had been there a long time. It seemed unlikely, but sure, why not? Send the wise men to Bethlehem to do the reconnaissance work and save a little bit on the national security budget.

So that was what the king did. He gargled, combed his hair, and went back to tell the wise men they should go to Bethlehem at once – with his blessing – on the condition that they come back and tell him who his successor was so he could send flowers. His breath smelled like Pine-Sol and the wise men left feeling queasy, but once they were back out in the night air they could see the star clearly again and followed it right to the doorway of a one-room house in Bethlehem.

It was a perfectly nice place, modest but well built. It just was not the kind of place they had expected to find a king. A dog was sniffing the woodpile under the eaves in hopes of a mouse. Someone was practicing the lute next door, going over the same phrase again and again. The smell of dinner was still in the air — wheat cakes cooked on a griddle greased with sheep's fat, lentils with lots of garlic and rice. If they chosen the place themselves they might never have knocked, but the star had chose it, so they did,

and when the door opened the couple inside almost died of fright.

Not that the wise men noticed. With their arms full of gifts, they crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters and snagging their robes on the rough furniture. All they could see was the baby, who was not afraid, and whose right eye shone with the same star they had seen before they ever left home. It was he, then, whoever he was. They did not have a clue, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and worshiped him. Then they gave him the things they had brought him ---- all the wrong things, they could see now, things he had no use for. They should have brought goat's milk, a warm blanket, something shiny to hang above his crib, only how could they have guessed?

The child's parents were gracious. They thanked the foreigners for their gifts and held them up for the baby to see. Then, to the wise men's complete alarm, the child's mother picked him up and handed him around, so that each one of them held that damp, soft, living weight in his arms. Then she took him back and nursed him until they all fell asleep where they sat.

In the morning, the wise men could not find their stars anywhere. They looked in all the corners and under the chairs. The baby's mother even shook out his blankets but after an initial panic the wise men said never mind, they did not need them anymore. They had found what they were looking for and they could not lose that. As much as they hated to, they guessed they had better be on their way.

No, they could not be going back through Jerusalem, they said. All three of them had had a dream that said steer clear of Jerusalem, as if they needed to be told. If anyone in Jerusalem knew anything at all they would be here instead of them. Besides, none of their old maps worked anymore. They would find a new way home. So the wise men picked up their packs, which were lighter than before, and then they lined up in front of the baby to thank him for the gifts he had given them. "What in the world are you talking

about?" the baby's mother laughed, and they told her so she could tell him later.

"For this home and the love here," said the first wise man, who could not remember how to say it in runes.

"For baby flesh," said the second wise man, who had no interest in living on herbs anymore.

"For a really great story," said the third wise man, who thought telling it might do a lot more for him than walking on coals.

Then the wise men trooped outside, stretched, kissed the baby good-bye, and went home by another way."¹

1. Barbara Brown Taylor, "Home By Another Way" Home By Another Way Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999 pp 28-31