

“We, Three Zoroastrians Are...”

Sermon: Year A, Feast of the Epiphany (*observed*)

Texts: Matthew 2:1–12, Isaiah 60:1–6, Ephesians 3:1–12

Preached: January 5, 2020 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from God, who draws all peoples to the Light, and from Christ Jesus, who is the Light.
AMEN

Well, since it's Epiphany, it's kind of a shame we're not singing the song we already sang last week during Lessons and Carols: “*We, three Zoroastrians are...*”

Oh, wait, that's not how it goes! It's “*We, three kings of Orient are...*”

But maybe it shouldn't be. I think my version is probably more accurate, if woefully less poetic.

On this Feast of the Epiphany, which we're celebrating a day early, the Church, has for many, many centuries told the story of these mysterious visitors from “the East.” Epiphany, which means “manifestation” or “appearing,” was originally the day on which the Church celebrated the appearing of Jesus, until 300 years later when Christmas displaced it, leaving us with twelve full days of Christmas, leading up to Epiphany. And very early on, this gospel reading from Matthew about the mysterious visitors became associated with the feast.

In popular understanding, probably influenced by the Psalm we sang about “kings bowing down before him,” and bearing gifts of tribute from far-off lands, the visitors by the Middle Ages had been dubbed “kings,” and in the Western church it was decided that there were three of them (though the Orthodox insisted there were twelve) and they even had names given them: Caspar, Melthior, and Balthazar. If you look back at the doorway we just chucked, you'll see the initials “CMB.” But as we sang during that rite, the letters stand for “Christus Mansionem Benedicat,” or “Christ, bless this house.” But people looked at these initials, marked on doorposts on the day the visitors were celebrated, and decided it must represent their names.

But if we look at the gospel text itself, there's nothing about any of this: Nothing that says they were kings. No names are given. Nothing that says there were three of them. Nothing that even says that they were all men. In fact, about all the text says of them is that they were *magoi* and that they came from the East. What the heck are *magoi*?

Here's what we know about *magoi*: They were a priestly caste from Persia, which is modern-day Iran. They practiced a religion we call Zoroastrianism, which had for many centuries been the dominant religion in that region. In fact, it kept that status until the rise of Islam. Zoroastrianism taught that there was a single, uncreated creator, pure Good, who had created everything that exists. They practiced good works and extensive charity as a means of keeping the fire of Good burning brightly in the world, shining light that kept the force of darkness at bay. They believed that this creator god had already twice made himself manifest among humans. They believed that the creator god was going to be made manifest a third and final time in the person of a being who would be born of a young virgin mother, and who would have the power to defeat the forces of evil, resurrect the dead, banish old age and decay from the world, and would usher in a new age of peace. Sound familiar? These *magoi* also spent a lot of time studying the stars and astrological phenomena, which at that time was considered to be the height of science, so they had gained a reputation throughout the Roman Empire for being wise and learned. And they practiced a radical equality of the sexes in spiritual matters, so women could be *magoi* just as easily as men.

So, what if, instead of the three crowned figures we have so long pictured and sung about, what if the mysterious visitors who come seeking Jesus are actually a group of Iranian scientists, men and women, who practice a different religion, and God uses their own faith and knowledge to draw them to bow down before Jesus, the Word made flesh, and to recognize in him the manifestation of God among humans? And perhaps more ironic, these Iranian scientists who practice another religion are used by God to let King Herod and the chief priest and scribes of the people in on the news that their own Messiah has been born.

Here's the thing, though: As Bishop Craig Saterlee points out, God seems to do whatever is necessary to embrace all people. From a manger, to a little house in Bethlehem, God's embrace goes out wider and wider and wider, drawing in people from far-off lands and different faiths. And in Jesus, God embraces outcasts and sinners, touches people with diseases of all sorts, embraces people living with all sorts of disabilities, and even draws people back from the jaws of death. And in the gospel of John, we are told that Jesus is lifted up on the cross in order to draw *all people* to himself. God's embrace cuts through all the boundaries we try to set on it.

It's actually quite an unsettling idea, when you think about it, this assertion that God's grace is radically all-embracing. The *magoi* didn't come looking for the Anointed One through preaching, or liturgy, or sacrament. They didn't know the Jewish scriptures. They were going about their daily lives, doing their scientific research, scanning the heavens for movement, trying to figure out the design of the cosmos. And suddenly their attention is drawn to a light, a star shining in the darkness, and they are drawn by their passion for a world restored and renewed to head out on a strenuous journey to see if their hopes and dreams have indeed been realized. The *magoi* have come to faith by a different path, and they go home by a different road.

This idea was sufficiently troubling to later Christians that they began to conjecture about what happened after the *magoi* returned home. And so the tradition developed a theory that they went back to Persia, to Iran, and lived exemplary lives of charity until some 35 years later when the Apostle Thomas came through, preaching about Jesus, and they were converted. But we don't know any of that. All we know is that these Iranian scientists who practiced another religion were the first to recognize God's power in this infant child.

So why would these Iranian scientists who practiced another religion bow down before this child? It wasn't because they expected him to wield military might and power. I think they bowed down for the very reasons described in our psalm today. In the psalm, the kings and peoples are drawn to bow down and pay homage to a very different kind of king, one whose power consists in delivering the poor who cry out in their distress, who comes to the aid of the oppressed and those who have no helper. This is a king who has compassion on the lowly and poor and preserves the lives of those who are needy. This is a king who grieves when violence spills the blood of the poor and the oppressed. That, the psalm says, is why this king is worthy of adoration and homage.

I think sometimes we want the Light of Christ to be all our own. But this Light that is shining into the world is not our exclusive possession. This Light is something that transcends national and religious boundaries to embrace all nations and peoples. It is a Light that frightens those in power, because it threatens to disrupt the oppressive systems on which they thrive. It is a Light, as the Gospel of John declares, that enlightens everyone coming into the world. The church has always struggled with that tendency toward exclusivity. We see the struggles in the Letter to the Ephesians, where the writer is pointing out to Jewish believers in Christ, and to those in the church who insisted that to follow Jesus meant to follow Jewish purity laws, that God in Christ Jesus has embraced the Gentiles, as well. Remember that "Gentile" in the Hebrew scriptures is *goyim*: the nations, the peoples, those who are not like us. Yet God's grace, Ephesians asserts, is for all the peoples. God's grace is wider than our limited imagination. All have a share in the Light made known to us in Christ Jesus.

Many of us have come to faith, have been drawn to the Light, by the road of the church, and by preaching, singing, liturgy, and sacrament that have shown forth the Light of Christ to us. But sometimes we resent that God's embrace is ever-widening, and draws people to the Light by paths we are not familiar with. We can be like the laborers in the vineyard who grumble because the vineyard owner is as generous to the folks who are day laborers hired at the end of the shift as he is to those regular workers who have been working in the vineyard all day. When they grumble, the vineyard owner asks, "Do you resent me because I'm generous?"

God's grace is mystery, not formula. The prophets and the psalmists speak a vision of *all* peoples being drawn to the Light, this Light that for us is made known in the baby of Bethlehem, in Jesus. Our calling is to arise and shine, because our Light has come. We are called to shine with that Light for all the world to see, a Light that lifts up the poor and lowly, and satisfies the longings and hopes of all those who dream of a world restored to wholeness and health. We are called to be Children of Light and of the Day, shining forth light to dawn on a weary world. And we should rejoice wherever we see the Light shining out of others—even those who go home by a different road.

Thanks be to God. AMEN