

WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.6.2019



Off by Nine Miles

The Reverend Pen Peery

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

I do welcome you to First Presbyterian Church and to this service of worship in a new year. Particularly, I welcome those who are visiting us today – whether in person – or who are worshiping via our television ministry on WBTV Channel 9 as well as those who are streaming online.

You'll find a lot of information about what is coming up in our life together as a congregation on the back of your bulletin. Note that next Sunday we have a real treat to invited the Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence to our pulpit. Anna is a professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, GA. She is with us next weekend to do a teacher-training event, and she will be our preacher. She's really good – and I would highly encourage you to be here and to bring someone who needs to hear the good news of the gospel...because Anna has a gift of sharing the good news.

Our second Scripture is from the gospel of Matthew. It's a story you've heard before. Listen with fresh ears.

+ + +

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem



with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, '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.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

+ + +

One of the unfortunate consequences of growing up in the house of two Presbyterian pastors is that they were pretty hardcore when it came to defining the timeframe for Christmas.

It wasn't just that we couldn't sing Christmas carols before December 24th. That, I could handle. What drove me crazy was their instance that Christmas wasn't over on January 26th. There were – I was reminded on numerous occasions – TWELVE days of Christmas.

And so it happened that long after the rest of the neighborhood had taken down their lights and dragged their wreaths and trees to the curb for disposal, and while seemingly everyone else had turned their minds to New Year's resolutions – there we would be: fully decorated, ornaments hanging from long-ago-dead branches with pine-needles competing for dominance with the 1980s shag carpet on the floor.



It was embarrassing.

But it was liturgical!!

Because Christmas lasted until January 6 – the day of Epiphany.

+ + +

Our Scripture on this Epiphany Sunday is the familiar story of those wise visitors from the east who followed a star to meet Jesus.

This morning, the wise men are the last characters from the nativity set that we are going to pack into the Christmas box. The poinsettias are gone. The Advent wreath is put away. The wreaths have been taken down. Only the wise men are left. In some ways, they are bridge characters that take us from one season to another.

Epiphany literally means “manifestation,” or “showing.” Or, less literally, it is a moment of recognition. Like Christmas, in the church Epiphany is more than a day – it is a season that lasts from today until the first day of Lent.

This Epiphany, the stories that we are going to hear on the Sundays between now and Lent all center around how people come to recognize Jesus. And that happened at Jesus’ baptism. It happened when he performed his first miracle of turning water into wine. It happened when he went to preach his first sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth.

In Matthew’s gospel, however, the first people to recognize Jesus were the least likely. In spite of the fact that the Messiah was born into a place that had anticipated his coming for years through the voices of a variety of prophets, Jesus’ own people did not recognize him when he arrived. For the religious authorities in Jerusalem – along with rulers like King Herod – it hadn’t even registered. They missed it.

Remarkably, the first people who recognized who Jesus was were foreigners – outsiders – people from another culture, who had a different faith, who were well outside the boundaries of those considered to be included in the covenant of grace.

They came – those wise men – from the east...a part of the world we know today as Iraq...because they had seen a star at its rising. They knew, somehow,



that there was a new king born to the Jews. The wise men set off on a journey – and as the star settled close to Jerusalem they thought they had reached their destination, because Jerusalem was a place that was important, and wealthy; already established as a seat of power – a place of privilege.

Indeed, Jerusalem was the place about which the prophet Isaiah wrote generations earlier, encouraging those who had been displaced from their once proud home of Jerusalem to imagine a future where their importance and wealth would be restored. We heard it minutes ago from Isaiah 60:

Arise, shine, for your light has come.

Lift up your eyes and look around –
they all gather together, they come to you...

...the wealth of the nations shall come to you...

...all those from Sheba (which is the East) shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord...

These visitors from the east were wise. They were familiar with this prophesy –even though it was not their Scripture – and they had brought the appropriate gifts. So when the star got close, they set off for the obvious place – to ask of King Herod where this new king was to be found.

Understandably, the King Herod was interested in the news of a new king. So he assembled his best Bible scholars and asked them why the wise men had come knocking on his door with their camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh – and what that meant about the rest of the prophesy in Isaiah.

But the Bible scholars, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman writes, “tell King Herod, ‘No, you have wrong the Scripture. And the wise men outside your window have the wrong Scripture. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. And those who already have a lot will gain more. And nothing will really change.



So what, King Herod asked, is the right Scripture?

And his Bible scholars told him it was from the prophet Micah:

And you, O Bethlehem, are by no means least...

...for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.

As a prophet, Micah talks about a ruler who isn't concerned with building up the prosperity of a city or a nation, but it focused on the well-being of the people. Micah anticipates a ruler who is born in humility and whose interests are in making sure the humble are lifted up – and protected from the powerful.

What frightened King Herod – and all of Jerusalem with him...because when the leader is upset, the people tend to feel it – what frightened Herod wasn't only that there might be a new king. What was really frightening to him was that there might be a different future. King Herod was invested in a future that kept things going as they were – which was to his benefit. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem represented change that would upend that future.

+ + +

There are nine miles between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The wise men hadn't missed their mark by much, but there is a world of difference between King Herod's throne in Jerusalem and where the star settled over the Christ child in Bethlehem.

Those visitors from the East covered a lot of ground on their journey, but I dare say those last nine miles were the hardest because of how much they had to adjust their expectations – from looking for a King whose interest was prosperity and power – to a king whose interest was in loving the neighbor and living toward a future where all people would be well.

To their credit, and as a testament to their wisdom, after they travelled those final nine miles, they were overwhelmed with joy when they found what they were searching for; when they had their epiphany moment and recognized Jesus as the true King who promised to usher in an alternative future. And once they had encountered this King, they left changed, and returned home by another way.



At first glance, the wise men may seem like outsiders from a far away and exotic land, but our journey is often similar. We work hard seeking after the things we think we want – but so much of the time we are looking in the wrong place. Investing in the wrong future. We're off by nine miles.

Maybe...as we move from the place of celebrating the gift of Christ's birth at Christmas, to recognizing what that birth means in Epiphany...maybe, like those Wise Men, we might be willing to keep looking...to continue the journey...to imagine a future so different than the one we've come to accept.

They're not easy miles to walk.

But it's worth the extra effort.

Because it's there that we find salvation in the form a King who cares more about being vulnerable than he does about being powerful.

