

### We Have Seen His Star in the East

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the Sunday before Epiphany, January 5, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Let me tell you about the Christmas gifts the Session gave Kay and me: twelve gifts in all, one for each of the twelve days of Christmas:

- one basket
- two candles,
- two champagne glasses,
- one bottle of champagne,
- one box of chocolates,
- one CD of romantic music,
- one gift certificate for a night at a bed and breakfast in Martinsburg, West Virginia,
- one gift certificate for a gift shop in Martinsburg,
- one pair of silk boxer shorts, and
- one red negligee (we're not sure which is for Kay and which is for me).

Twelve items in all.

Kay and I have been wondering what the session is trying to tell us with these gifts. We, however, deeply appreciate them and the thoughts behind them. I'm so glad the session gave us these 12 items rather than 12 drummers drumming and all the other gifts the song writer claims his true love gave to him over the twelve days of Christmas.

We celebrated Christmas just twelve days ago. Today is the Twelfth and last day of Christmas. During the middle ages this day was called Twelfth Night, the night before Epiphany. Christians celebrate Twelfth Night as the evening before the Wise Men brought their gifts to Jesus. Some churches display a manger scene during the twelve days of Christmas. On Christmas Eve the baby is placed in the manger surrounded by shepherds. On the

twelfth day of Christmas, the congregation comes to church to discover that the shepherds have been removed and in their place are three wise men.

The wise men or magi were so called because of their knowledge of the sciences, including astronomy. The wise men carefully observed the stars. One night they noticed a star shining in the west more brilliantly than any star every shone before. They made preparations to follow it. They continued to follow until it stood over the place where Jesus was. They entered the house, knelt down and paid homage to Jesus. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

That's all the Bible says about the wise men. But human imagination has filled in the story. During the Middle Ages Christians believed that there were three wise men, one for each of the three gifts. They were kings.

The first to arrive was an Ethiopian king. He was middle-aged and dark-skinned with a short dark beard. His name was Balthasar. The myrrh he held in his hands prefigured the death of the Son of God. This story reminds us that Africa was evangelized long before America. Long before Christianity became a Western European religion, it was a religion deeply entrenched in Africa. Christians today are almost entirely ignorant of the great history of Christianity in Africa and the lives of the saints that made that church a brilliant light in the early centuries of Christianity.

The second king to arrive, according to the tradition, was a Hindu, an old man with a long beard, and some say he represented old age. His name was Melchior. He brought gold in testimony of Christ's royalty. Many of us don't realize that before Christianity became a Western religion it was an Eastern religion. Missionaries took the Gospel to Syria and Persia and on to China and India. Ancient inscriptions in India indicate the presence of the Church from at least the 5th century. Christians in America need to wake up to the fact that we have lots of brothers and sisters in Christ in India and China and all around the world.

The third king was a Greek. He was young and represented the future. He was blue-eyed, beardless, and his name was Gaspar. His gift of frankincense was a token of the Christ child's divinity. He represents the entrance of the Christian faith to Europe and, eventually, to America.

These are traditions that grew up in the Middle Ages. None of this is in the Bible but I believe it captures what Matthew is trying to tell us. We believe that Jesus Christ is God's gift to everyone in the entire world, red and yellow, black and white, young and old. We believe that whoever follows the best light in their religion will be drawn toward Christ.

The story of the adoration of the Magi reminds the church of our missionary responsibilities to all the world and our hope that all people, everywhere, will one day bow their knee to Christ. About thirty years ago, I heard Dr. Martin Luther King say something that I believe was inspired by the light that shines

upon the story of the Magi. He said, "I have a dream that "Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!" The story of the journey of the wise men from the East points to a day when all people, everywhere, will open our treasure chests, and offer Christ our gifts.

And now we're about to make a journey from our seats to the Table of the Lord. Let us come offering to the Lord the very best that we have - to live for him and bear witness to him in our lives and in our words.

Let us pray: Eternal God, by a star you led magi to the worship of your son. Guide the nations of the earth by your light, that the whole world may see your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Announcements S.S. pick up lamp lighters, stop smoking  
begins Jan 13; Finance Comm after service, church office

#### Call to Worship

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
Nations shall come to your light  
and rulers to the brightness of your rising.

#### Opening Prayer

Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of your glory  
rising in splendor. the radiance of your incarnate Word pierces  
the night that covers the earth and signals the dawn of justice  
and peace. May his brightness illumine our lives and beckon all  
nations to walk as one in your light. We ask this through Jesus  
Christ your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you and  
the Holy Spirit, in the splendor of eternal light, God forever  
and ever. Amen.

#### Prayers of the People

Flooding in the North West