

January 2, 2011

The Second Sunday after Christmas

Matthew 2.1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar...

This morning's Gospel reading is from the Epiphany story in Matthew as the travelers bearing their strange gifts seek out the Christ child that their charts and stars have revealed them. It is part and parcel to the Christmas pageant, of course, just ask any of the multitudes of pint-sized kings that marched up the aisle here a few weeks ago.

As many of you know, this story has been embellished a bit by the faithful throughout the last couple of millennia. It has captured our imaginations. Matthew is the only Gospel that mentions these guys and he doesn't really tell much about them. It is not likely that they are actually kings and we're not sure what a "wise man" really is. There's no mention of how many there are, but the fact of three gifts assumes that there were three people. It is unlikely that Jesus was still a babe in arms by the time they arrived, more likely he was a toddler.

The idea that they were kings came about as a reference to Isaiah's prophecies about the coming Messiah, that kings would bow down and do him homage. But in truth, there are only two kings in this story and they are named: Herod and Jesus, factions earthly and heavenly mentioned early in the story that will be at odds until the close. Herod is a tyrant who rules his people with fear and violence.

The wise men in our gospel are Herod's advisers, the chief priests and scribes whom he calls together to inform him of the child's whereabouts. Those chief priests and scribes tell Herod that this infant Messiah, born right under his nose, will dethrone him. These wise men are academically learned and function as Herod's closest advisers. But it doesn't get them very far, only as far as helping Herod manipulate a plot to destroy the child and all the children in his path.

So if our traveling worshipers, our magi, are not quite kings and not exactly wise men, who then are they? This question is a problem. But then, the Gospel always hands us problems.

Matthew, the gopeller, is never terribly interested in people of power, whether that power is money or knowledge or status. Matthew tells us that Jesus denounces rulers who lord over those they rule (20.25), that God does not reveal things to the "wise and intelligent" (11.25). Matthew is concerned, as Jesus is concerned, with those on the fringes of society, those who might otherwise be

overlooked, those who might otherwise not hear the message of this loving and extraordinarily inclusive God.

And so again, in light of Matthew's understanding of God, who are these magi?

Matthew's magi are people who do what they are told to do, they are humble beyond social expectations—they kneel before a woman and child—they are people to whom God reveals what is hidden, and from whom God derives praise.

God favors these men. God favors them with knowledge with which they go into the world and discover Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

There is no real harm in envisioning these men as centuries of artists and faithful storytellers have, as rich and brilliant. In some ways, it helps us to remember the story, to tell it in a way that helps us concentrate on the very most central character, Jesus, rather than on all of the controversy that surrounds him, all of the back-stories and side-stories and minor characters.

I think just as it is easier for us to cast the shepherds of our nativity as friendly, gentle, sheep-loving people who come quietly to see the miracle of the Christ Child's birth when, in actuality they were likely a rough lot, anti-social, dirty and unfit for human company. In the same way, it is unlikely that the magi were a regal bunch with great notions of what they were doing. More likely, they were star-gazers to whom information was given. By God.

This message is hard to hear. We'd rather think of those first called to witness this world altering event to be folks we're comfortable with, maybe not kings and very wise people, but at least the clean and clued-in. We've taken these extraordinary biblical stories and made them into something more palatable, more within our grasp.

This is understandable considering the shocking reality of the core message: God came as a baby, born in squalid conditions, to bring a message of peace and love into the world. That alone is hard to wrap our minds around. Add into it the rough and dirty shepherds, the clueless and humble magi and a whole trail of bloodshed about to occur and it is really no wonder that we need to play it down just to accept it into our own confused and contradictory lives.

But as we enter the celebration of the Epiphany, whether we picture kings or wise men, remember this: our church is not now and never has been about insiders and outsiders. Our church is not about separating the clean from the dirty, the holy from the damned, the wise from the foolish, the loved from the dismissed. Our church is not about that because our GOD is not about that.

Our church, the scrappy band of followers of that poverty-stricken infant, our church believes in a God whose revelations are not just offered to all, but are offered *first* to those far from center. And our lesson from the magi this morning

is that we might be called into the humble admission that God's glory is manifested where we least expect it. And even more, where we'd be least likely to look.