

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, December 27, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
A Secret Summons

During Christmas Eve services this past week, our scripture texts came from the familiar Christmas Story as told in the Gospel of Luke. Also, Year C in our lectionary calendar began with Advent on Sunday November 29th and continues until the beginning of Advent next year on Sunday, November 27th. During Year C most of our gospels texts will be drawn from the Gospel of Luke. Also, on Christmas Eve, I shared insights from the book, The First Christmas, What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth, authored by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Their book explores the fact that the Christmas story from The Gospel of Luke and the Christmas Story from the Gospel of Matthew take very different perspectives. Luke's account of the Christmas Story is more focused on Mary, and giving voice to those who are lowly, like the shepherds. Matthew's account is more focused on Joseph and King Herod, and on connecting the Christmas story of the Birth of Jesus to the birth of Moses and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.

Biblical Commentator, R. Alan Culpepper, highlights some of the connections between the Old Testament and the stories in Matthew. Culpepper says, *"God's revelation to Joseph in dreams guides Matthew's story, reminding us that the Old Testament Joseph was a dreamer. Pharaoh killed the Israelite children; Herod killed the children of Bethlehem. Moses led Israel out of Egypt, so Jesus was taken to Egypt and then to the promised land."*¹

Today's scripture text from the Gospel of Matthew is the familiar story of the Wise Ones from The East. The story, I believe, may be familiar, but not fully understood. The story of the Wise Ones from the East only appears in the Gospel of Matthew, just like the story of the angels appearing to the shepherds only appears in the Gospel of Luke. When we merge the Christmas stories from both Matthew's Gospel and Luke's story, the three wise men appearing to pay homage to the baby Jesus, becomes simply another scene in the pageant. The figures at the stable include the shepherds and the wise men as though they all appeared on the same night and together at the same time.

Matthew's story begins with Wise Ones from the East following the star to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem they tell their story of the miraculous star leading them. They are strangers from a foreign land. They assume that the Jewish people in Jerusalem would know the location of this baby. No one can tell them. However, they have stirred up so much interest that King Herod is disturbed about this potential threat to his kingdom. King Herod calls a meeting of the chief priests and the scribes to learn more from them about the prophecies about where such a king might be born. The Jews in Jerusalem remember the prophecies and tell Herod what they remembered. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophets." (Matthew 2: 5)

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

These wise ones have unique insight into what has happened in the world. They understand that the star they have followed is the star of a child born to be the king of the Jews. Their wisdom and insight offers a perspective that the Jews in Jerusalem have not seen or noticed. King Herod responds to this news recognizing it as a threat to him. Matthew then tells us, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew 2:3) All of Jerusalem was frightened. Instead of rejoicing at the news of the long awaited Messiah, they become frightened.

Biblical Commentator, Thomas H. Troeger, offers the following: *"Here is a meeting of two worldviews: Jewish and Gentile, devout and pagan. The seekers could not find the Christ without the guidance of those who had the Scriptures, but why did only one group of wise men go to Bethlehem? Why did the chief priests and scribes, the religious leaders of the people, not go with the magi? Had they ceased to take the promises of the Scriptures seriously, or were they unwilling to journey with the foreign seekers? The magi were looking for the Messiah, but the Jewish religious leaders did not join them in the search, and as a result they did not witness the child Jesus."*²

After conferring with the chief priests and the scribes, King Herod then offers a secret summons to the Wise Ones from the East to meet with him. This secret summons has the danger of completely altering the purpose of the journey of the Wise Ones. Herod gets more specific information from them about the timing and location of the star. He then instructs the Wise Ones: *"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."* (Matthew 2:8) We know that this was complete deception on the part of Herod. He wanted them to find the child only so that he could kill him and eliminate the threat to his kingdom. We know this to be true, since Matthew tells us that when Herod did not hear back from the Wise Ones, he orders the slaughter of *"all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men"* (Matthew 2:16).

Then the Wise Ones from the East set out toward Bethlehem and find that the star is once again guiding them. *"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."* (Matthew 2: 10a) Both the fact that the star reappeared to the Wise Ones and that they were overwhelmed with joy when it stopped, tells us that the Wise Ones were staying true to their wisdom, their insight, their understanding of what has occurred rather than being taken in by Herod. We know the ending: they kneel down and pay homage to the baby Jesus and then they offer their 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."* (Matthew 2: 12)

As we now understand this story in more of its true light, I would like to suggest five lessons that it offers to us today:

² Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

- 1.) We can learn to trust our own wisdom as the Wise Ones did. Joyful hearts awake those who do.
- 2.) We can learn to distrust the powerful ones who always seek to maintain their power and to eliminate those who threaten them. Thus we can join together with one another in communities of love and faith.
- 3.) We can learn to stand firm in our convictions and not be easily deceived by those who seek to do harm. Thus we will bear good fruit according to God's will.
- 4.) We can learn to be alert and open to guidance from God through stars, or through scriptures, or through dreams, or even through the wisdom of strangers. Thus the future is promised to be even great than we might imagine.
- 5.) We can learn to commit to follow the star, to follow God, in unexpected ways. Thus we are open new adventures and new ways to live out our faith.

May the birth of Jesus that we have celebrated this Christmas fill our hearts, our minds, and our souls with rejoicing. May we learn from the Wise Ones. May we bow before the child born King of the Jews. Amen.