

Second Sunday after Christmas (#2) – January 4, 2015
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

The Visit of the Magi

This Second Sunday after Christmas is just before the Day of the Epiphany—Epiphany, from the Greek *epiphaine* meaning “manifestation” or “shining forth”—and we remember the first great manifestation of the presence and power of God in Christ shining forth to the wider world beyond ancient Palestine, through the visit by some foreign visitors to the babe born in Bethlehem. The God who became a human, and lived and died as one of us—and who is alive today—was manifested to us all, through the visit of these “Magi.”ⁱ It is a beautiful and mysterious story, and the more we look, the more we’ll see.

First, these [“astrologers,” or] “wise men” as they are translated, are called in the original Greek, *magoi*—from which we get the words “magi” and “magic” and “magician”—but *not* the word “majesty.” Contrary to popular belief, this word “Magoi” cannot be translated “kings.” In fact, the word “magus”—or its plural, “magoi”—was a somewhat derogatory name given to itinerant magicians or entertainers—members of a class or community of people commonly seen as fools by more learned and powerful people—they are the gypsies, or undocumented aliens, as it were, of an earlier day.ⁱⁱ These visitors were not powerful, learned or wealthy kings; and nowhere do the Scriptures say there were three of them—that’s the stuff of later legend. We’d all love to see the learned and wise, or powerful kings and presidents, leaders and dictators, pay homage to Jesus and join his mission of repairing the world and restoring just and loving relationships. But, time and again, that just doesn’t happen. These foolish foreign magi nevertheless turn a local birth announcement from the one-horse town of Bethlehem into an international headline as they follow a rather mobile star to Bethlehem in Judea. There is something marvelously foolish about a troupe of wanderers following a mobile star. And there is something disturbingly foolish about their asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”—blurting it out publicly in the city of Jerusalem which was ruled by the iron hand of Rome and its puppet king Herod, the tyrant who had not even hesitated to have three of his own sons killed when he had seen them as rivals for his throne; and who would soon carry out a genocide on the children of Bethlehem after the departure of these “magi.” So, before the baby has even cut his first tooth, this extraordinary child has already been the hope of many prophets; and has drawn the attention of a despot King, chief priests and scribes through these foolish foreigners. The account of this visit is full of threats and promise, evoking fear and great joy. Those in power are frightened by this new babe who has already been given the title of King apparent; but for these foolish visitors, this encounter is a source of overwhelming joy, an infallible sign of the presence of God. This accords with St. Paul’s notion in his first letter to the Corinthians (Ch. 1) that God’s mystery is a truth often hidden from the learned and powerful and wise, and is instead revealed most fully to the simple, to those whom the world deems foolish.

And just who is this newborn child that the magi identify as “king of the Jews?” On this Second Sunday after Christmas, when we hear Jeremiah deliver his prophecy and

Matthew deliver this powerful story, what is there left to say? The best we may be able to do is to enter the house with these magi, these foolish foreigners, and let the hopes and fears of all our years meet in the encounter with the God who came to us as a newborn child. With his birth, so much else was born: a new humanity, a new hope, a new possibility—a new God looking back at us with brand new eyes that were older than time itself. Today, revealed to the foolish first was “The Word [who] became flesh and [lives] among us.”

Anything is possible in a world where God consents to be born.ⁱⁱⁱ As Irenaeus of Lyons, an early church leader who [around 190CE,] wrote, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.”^{iv} This mystery of the Incarnation—God who became flesh—was who the visitors encountered. The very presence and purpose and power of God—the very being of God—had become flesh.

Today we are still drawn to the mystery of the Incarnation of God born Jesus in Bethlehem, not so much seeking a way to explain or figure out this mystery but rather seeking an encounter with this God become human. For in our heart of hearts we are all seeking a peace and a purpose, a meaning and sense of worth beyond what our own lives and our world can supply. We yearn for something more. We look for a star to guide us, angels to lead us, but mostly for a Holy Family to embrace us. Our true yearning is for authentic lives lived with real connection to others, God, and ourselves.

In Jesus of Nazareth we have the astounding in-breaking of the fullness of God into all of life and history. Only when God cuts through and enters fully into history do our personal and societal and global histories have any real chance of modifying their often self-destructive courses. We are met in this Christmas season with a baby, but far more than a baby. In the Incarnation—the Word made flesh—the birth of God in human form—the Risk of all risks taken. The Unknowable becomes known. The Infinite also becomes finite. The Formless takes form. Being itself becomes a being. The Word becomes flesh. God’s deliverance freeing the world from the grip of all that distorts our full capacities for goodness, truth and beauty as humans made in the image of God—this restorative operation is set in motion with the birth of the Christ Child, this Prince of Peace.^v Though, in some sense it seems foolish to believe that such a 2000-year old Epiphany could be just as joyfully received by us today, and could make any real difference in the course of our lives and today’s world. And yet, as one statesman put it, “People, and nations, do act wisely – *once* they have exhausted all possible alternatives.”^{vi} Recent events in our city and nation and world show us that we’ve exhausted most possible alternatives; and we need the manifestation of this great mystery that we witness to again today, that “the Word became flesh and *lives* among us.” We need it badly because He is the source of our hope.^{vii} In this Word become flesh we are given hope. In his meditative poem “*Grounds for Hope*,” theologian Gerhard Frost, wrote: “If I am asked what are my grounds for hope, this is my answer: Light is lord over darkness, truth is lord over falsehood, and life is lord over death. Of all the facts that I daily live with, there’s none is more comforting than this: If I have two rooms, one light and the other dark, and I open the door between

them, the dark room becomes lighter without the light one becoming darker. I know that this is no headline, but it's a marvelous footnote, and God comforts me in that."^{viii}

So—back to the Magi. Along with their gifts, what do we bring as we join these foolish foreigners? Some of us may have had a chance this season to see once again—or for the first time—Gian Carlo Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors." Recall, Amahl, the crippled boy, is cured when he himself gives to the infant Jesus the gift of his crutch. That's what we should all bring to the infant, namely our crutches, our ways of making God responsible for all the thinking, growing and doing that we should be undertaking and that God has empowered us to do. Or as William Sloane Coffin put it, "God comes to earth as a child, so that you and I and every other adult might finally grow up." And, as Coffin also put it, "Today, the same three fundamental choices face all of us: with Herod...we can choose to be hostile to Christ; with the chief priests and scribes, we can choose to be indifferent to him (say, by being devoted to church work, but not the work of the church!); or with the wise men, we can choose to fall on our knees and worship, offering Christ our hearts' best treasures."^{ix}

The openness and risk—the joy and generosity—of the foolish foreigners reflect the very foolishness of God, born in a stable, which was really ultimate wisdom. The wisdom of these visitors who are called wise in the gospel story was not a precondition for their encounter with this infant, but it certainly appears to be the one gift they took away with them from their visit, as they wisely sidestepped Herod and left for their own country by another road. For those who encounter God often find themselves a bit wiser as they head on their way home, after the fact.

In conclusion, the reason we may have some trouble with the mystery of the full incarnation of God in Jesus is probably that we have not been able to recognize or admit the mystery of our own, albeit limited, incarnation. It is difficult to accept that the integration of God-with-us that was incarnated—enfleshed—and fully realized in Jesus can also be realized, in part, in us. Our selves on our somewhat insignificant journeys are very likely microcosms of what God is doing everywhere and what God did perfectly in Jesus. If we are to believe the whole, we must start by trying to believe the part. If we are to love God's beginning and God's conclusion, then we must try to love God's process of Word become flesh in Jesus, *and* in ourselves. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end—and much of the middle too—but we are beta, gamma, delta, and so on. It is all one. And we have been made one by God's yes to flesh in Christ. As Thomas Merton, wrote on Christmas Day in 1966 calling for everyday to be The Epiphany: "Christ is born to us today, in order that He may appear to the whole world through us. This one day is the day of his birth, but every day of our mortal lives, must be his manifestation."^x So, rise and shine!

ⁱ We have as our earliest witness the Biblical testimony to this mystery manifested—rooted in the fact of Jesus, and in the rich backdrop of Mary his mother, the fearful and ruthless Herod and his cohort, and the learned religious leaders whom Herod has pinpoint the location of the birthplace. And we have these foreign astrologers or wise men or magi as they are variously called, along with their gifts: gold that reveals a king, incense that reveals God, or myrrh that reveals the one who would live and die as one of us. Also we have the star that guided these visitors from the east, and a dream that guided them on a right path out of town.

ⁱⁱ Sam Portaro, Brightest and Best (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 20-22

ⁱⁱⁱ See Clayton L. Morris and Barbara Brown Taylor, Worship and Preaching That Work For Evangelism (New York: Episcopal Church Center, 1992), p. 36.

^{iv} Irenaeus, Adversus Haereses, V preface

^v You were expecting just an innocent baby? Far more than a sweet baby in a stable, far more than one who would become a great teacher even, and an example of how to live, we meet indeed the world's Deliverer—The Messiah of God—the Christ—fully God and fully human.

^{vi} From Abba Eban, quoted on at least three different occasions. See Robert Trumbull, "Japan Welcomes Eban Warmly; Her Industry Impresses Israeli" *New York Times* (March 19, 1967), p. 14; "U.N. Waits Formal Answers" [Associated Press], *The Evening Times* (Trenton (NJ) Evening Times, June 7, 1967); and "Abba Eban at the United Nations: Not Backward to Belligerence But Forward to Peace" [article on UN address by Abba Eban on June 6, 1967], *Canadian Jewish Chronicle Review* (Montreal, Canada, June 16, 1967).

^{vii} Obviously what happened in Bethlehem 2000 thousand years ago didn't solve all our problems, nor avert all our warmaking and conflict, nor cure all our illnesses, nor prevent our failing and falling and dying. Nonetheless, in the presence of this infant we do meet the God who became flesh and who dwelt among us, the one who would live and die and rise again—the same one who is alive today continuing God's mission and enlisting us to rise and shine and join him in repairing the world and restoring all into right relationship, until the day when God will be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23).

^{viii} In Gerhard Frost, Journey of the Heart (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 86.

^{ix} William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 4, 20-21

^x Thomas Merton, Seasons of Celebration (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1965), p. 112.