

“A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS”
Scripture Texts: Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12
A Sermon by Richard Clewell
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
January 6, 2008

This past week there was an interesting news report from South Florida about the disappearance of several baby Jesus figures from outdoor crèche exhibits. One enterprising exhibitor replaced his missing figurine with another implanted with a GPS device. When the infant model was stolen, local police were able to track and find the missing Jesus. How clever is this use of modern technology!

In our gospel text this morning we have a much earlier account of such a global positioning event which was far more important to the world of that day and for all future days. It is approximately two weeks after the birth of the child Jesus, and his parents have found more suitable quarters in the town of Bethlehem. Yes, in spite of the traditional picture of the wise men arriving at the stable at the same time as the shepherds, Matthew relates that these wise men (magi) came from the East to Jerusalem asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Who were these men? How did they get there?

First of all, they probably were not kings nor were there necessarily three of them. They are not even present in the Luke account of the birth. Magi is better translated “seer” and commonly designated a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian (today’s Iran) experts in astrology, astronomy, and dream interpretation who also were students of ancient texts and manuscripts including knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. They represent pagans or Gentiles who come to pay homage and to worship the new king. The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are fitting for the royalty of the new king rather than the treasures of their coffers or nations. They initiate Matthew’s theme to his Jewish Christian community that Jesus is “the King of the Jews,” the Messiah, the royal heir of the Davidic promises. By this happening he sets the stage for Jesus’ ministry in proclaiming the Kingdom of God and the passion account in which he is crucified as “King of the Jews.” This announcement made by Gentiles triggers the conflict of the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of God which dominate this Gospel.

How did these scholarly seers get there? They had observed a star at its appearance in the east and had studied it and ancient texts for what such an exceptional celestial phenomenon might mean. They had studied this new star for perhaps as much as three years and followed its path westward. They had

concluded it marked the birth of a king and connected it with the hope of Messiah related to “a star out of Jacob” (Number 24:17, various Isaiah texts). And so their “solar positioning satellite” led them to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, where they conferred with the puppet king Herod and his court. For Matthew this star forms an interpretative bridge between pagan astrological hopes and Jewish Biblical promises. This is the revealing of God’s light to the nations of which our Isaiah text has spoken and still speaks. For Matthew these Magi believed and were faithful in following the light and the revealing Scriptures to Bethlehem. They heard and acted on God’s epiphany to them and in their joyous response to the revealing, stand in stark contrast to the threatened religious and political establishment.

What difference does this event make to exiled Israel, the struggling infant Church, or to us in this confusing and chaotic twenty-first century? In each situation the outlook was and is rather dark and gloomy in so many ways. People are pawns in the game of the politically powerful and corrupt. There are fears about wars and rumors of wars. Terrorism and rebellion are in the air in response to ruling nations and elite classes becoming more greedy and self-aggrandizing. Again and again the general populace experiences growing hopelessness and helplessness in observing any sign of a better way of life. People cry out for relief yet see no light at the end of the tunnel. This was certainly accurate for the exiled Israelites in Isaiah’s day. His mission was to remind them of God’s promises to them and a number of years later they were returned to their homeland and center of worship. His prophecy continued to promise greater hope for the nations of the world.

This also was the circumstance for Israel under Roman rule and subjugation in the context of Matthew’s Gospel event and the Church’s continuing dilemma some seventy years later. Again the hope of God’s kingdom way is revealed in the life and ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ indicating the promise of final triumph over the world system. The Judeo-Christian believers for whom Matthew wrote this Gospel, had knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and the promises of the prophets including the Isaiah texts. It was out of Israel that God reveals divine deliverance, first to the exiled chosen people, and then to the whole world. The judgment of Israel and of the nations becomes the means by which God is fully and most widely acknowledged. It is through God’s kingdom way in Jesus Christ that lasting fellowship with the One God revealed to Israel and shared with the world can be fully experienced. The story of Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel through Abraham, David and the prophets.

Today, this Matthew account stands in distinct contrast to the mood and concern about the current world system we inhabit. It affirms the continuing promises of God that the kingdom way is a reality and is active today in our world.

The light shining in the darkness, the Light of Life, continues to transform lives and will ultimately result in kingdom way triumphing in this world. That light continues to satisfy the longing of all human hopes for ending alienation and for living meaningful life in the present. God's grace precedes human actions and is the reconciling strand for all people and nations.

In the Epiphany ("revealing," "shining") we celebrate today, Jesus Christ is God's revelation to the whole world, the promised "Light to the Nations." We, as the wise men of old, are to be open to God's continuing revelation, and to faithfully act on behalf of the kingdom way rather than accommodating to the current world system and culture. That's a huge challenge for each of us. Can we worship our king? Can we follow the light of his Spirit? May God's grace enable us to respond in faith and to do so.

Amen

Rev. Richard D. Clewell, D.Min., Pastor