

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12 The Magi Visit
Title: Epiphany

Date: January 2, 2011

"We Three Kings of Orient are...." These are the first words of a Christmas song many of us learned before we learned what the Orient was. I remember thinking that they were from a country named Orientare. Many of us, if pressed could actually name them: Caspar of Tarsus, Melchior of Persia and Balthasar of Saba. From Christmas cards we imagine their appearance: Caspar , young and looking vaguely European; Melichior, middle aged and looking vaguely Asian; and Balthasar, very old and hailing from Africa. We've all seen these- and many of us when we look at Matthew's text automatically insert the number 3 when we read "wise men from the East." I am constantly amazed a the power of story. One can search the entire Bible, any number of ancient documents from the Early Church and not find any reference to Caspar of Tarsus, Melchior of Persian or Balthasar of Saba. There is good reason for that-they are the creation of Medieval literature.

The first mention of the 3 kings comes from Bede- an 8th Century saint:
"The first was called Melchior; he was an old man, with white hair and long beard; he offered gold to the Lord as to his king. The second, Gaspar by name, young, beardless, of ruddy hue, offered to Jesus his gift of incense, the homage due to Divinity. The third, of black complexion, with heavy beard, was called Balthazar; the myrrh he held in his hands prefigured the death of the Son of man."

You see what he was doing don't you- he was using the story of the wise men as an allegory to tell the story of Jesus. This approach is not unique-the words to our familiar hymn were written to go along with a Christmas pageant in 1857. Probably the fullest use of the story is found in Lew Wallace's Ben Hur in 1880. Each of the Wise men is prompted by a heavenly voice telling him that their faith is to be rewarded and that they would see the promised child and bear witness to him.

What I find ironic is that, even though Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar are fictional characters- the way that their creators use them mirrors Matthew's use of the Wise Men in his Gospel.

We know who the Magi were. Some of our translations translate wise men here. That's too bad for Magi is a title, an office. The Magi were Zoroastrian priests, and it makes all the sense in the world, given the shared history of Zoroastrianism and Judaism that they would know of the Star. Zoroastrianism was the court religion of Cyrus the Persian, the very same Cyrus the Persian who conquered Babylon and made possible the return from Exile. Like Judaism, Zoroastrians worshipped one God, whose name, Ahura Mazda translated out to Wise Lord. Like Yahweh, he was Spirit, forbidding idols and images and demanding high ethical standards from his followers. When the Jews ran across Ahura Mazda, they had an epiphany – this god and their God were one and the same God. God is not merely the god of a small slice of land bordered by the Mediterranean, God is God- the creator of the Universe! And while we have no records of mass conversions of Zoroastrians converting to Judaism, the Biblical texts that come after the Exile all share to conviction that Yahweh, or God – is the God of the Universe.

Unfortunately, in the centuries between the return from Babylon, the implications of Yahweh being God, even of the Gentiles was lost. Far from seeing themselves as a light to the Gentiles- Judaism turned inward- even to the point of viewing Gentiles with suspicion at best- outright hostility at worst. Even if Herod was not incredibly paranoid about being displaced by an upstart king- he would have been suspicious by any visitors from beyond Roman borders.

This narrow parochial view- shared by the majority of religious leaders blinded them to the implications of Gentiles coming to pay homage to a Jewish Messiah. This was nothing less than a fulfillment of one of the more common apocalyptic expectations- that when the Messiah came, the nations would come seeking him. Typical our Isaiah passage this morning.: *³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... And if that wasn't enough we have They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*

But it's not enough to note that the nations will see the light of God's hope and love; there is a flip side to that coin, and that is to recognize that there is a darkness over the earth... and darkness rarely, if ever, welcomes the light

So we are not surprised when we hear of Herod's double dealing- but the Dark's reaction to the Light of the World did not end with Herod. Worldwide Christianity is

entering a period of increased persecution. The bombing of churches in Egypt and Iraq is finally breaking through to the mainstream media and Pakistan's sentencing a Christian woman, Asia Bibi to death for insulting Mohammad (here crime to recognize that Jesus is a true prophet- from a Christian, what a surprise) made it to NPR. Between Nigeria, a country that is 50-50 Muslim and Christian, a spate of Christmas Eve attacks on churches, killing 6 including the pastor and Al Qaida urging its affiliates to kill Christians ; Radical Islam is demonstrating its deathly opposition to the Christian message of God's grace in Jesus Christ. India is turning a blind eye to Hindu fundamentalists' increasingly violent attack on Christians; Vietnam waited till the last minute to give permits allowing its Christian community to gather to celebrate Christmas (20,000 showed up in Ho Chi Minh City.) Here in the West, opposition to Christians usually takes the form of using laws designed to fight discrimination against Christians. So last year, a London couple who owned a hotel were brought up on criminal charges after a Muslim woman complained that she was made uncomfortable about their position on Islam. They were cleared on all criminal charges, but not before they lost 80% of their bookings- putting them out of business. Here in the States, an atheist group is suing to put an end to clergy housing deduction. It doesn't come up to the standards physical persecution in other countries, but is indicative of an attitude that is implacable towards us. IF you want to learn more, the Voices of the Martyrs or www.persecution.org websites are helpful.

But Light will always overcome Dark, it always has. That is its nature. It is for us to bear witness to the Light, to reflect in our lives the Light of God's grace and love. When you think about it, that is all the Wise Men from the East did. We get hung up on them proclaiming the Child King, when what we should be noticing that God's love and God's grace and not hampered by any man made obstacles, certainly not ones of national borders, language or ethnicity. We, like them, gather and worship. We, like them, declare the Child born in a Manger the Light of the World. We, like them, bear witness to.

Which brings us to the Lord's supper. We tend to emphasize our coming to this Table, as individual disciples. we, do that, of course but sometimes it is helpful to remember we also come as a church called out and empowered by God to accomplish

the tasks that God has set before, us. as we gather this morning, let's remember we do so, not just with our friends, family and neighbors, but with the entire worldwide church.

Let us pray....