

Epiphany Sunday: Hope Revealed
Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12
Salem United Methodist Church; January 6, 2019
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

Christmas lasts for twelve days in the church, beginning on Christmas Day and ending on Epiphany, January 6. This year Epiphany actually falls on a Sunday. Throughout Advent and Christmas we have focused on the theme of hope. We defined hope as a feeling of wanting or expecting something good to happen. Hope brings a sense of optimism. Today the hope that the Christ Child brings is revealed to us in the Epiphany.

When we retell the birth of Jesus, usually the lowly shepherds and the wealthy magi meet at the manger on Christmas Eve, both worshipping the newborn king. Did you ever wonder how the magi traveled a long distance and got there on the same night as the shepherds? Well, they didn't. There are clues in our scripture that it took some amount of time to follow the star until it stopped. One clue in the scripture is that they visited a child, and not a baby. We know very little about these magi or wise men. Note that the scripture does not say how many there were. A seventh century English Benedictine monk, named Bede, wrote that there were three, probably based on the number of gifts. Bede named each and offered a description: Melchior who was an old man with white hair and long beard; Gasper, a young beardless man with a ruddy complexion; and Balthasar who had black skin with a heavy beard. Recently I read that the magi might have been Zoroastrian priests. Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion originating in the area of Iran. They believe in one god who created the universe. They believe in a cosmic battle between good and evil, with good winning at the end of time. They developed an astrology to help them both understand current events and predict events. They also believe in messiahs, judgement after death, heaven and hell, and free will. Recognize any similarities between Zoroastrianism and Judaism? What hope were they seeking in following the star? When these magi were seeking the Messiah in a Jewish king, they may also been seeking to build an interfaith and political bridge.

No matter who the magi were or what their purpose was, why did the writer of the Gospel of Matthew include them? This Gospel was written to a Jewish community to prove that Jesus is the Messiah, yet Matthew's Gospel does not include any Jewish folk visiting the baby Jesus. Instead, the writer has these non-Jewish priests as the only ones who are seeking the Messiah. In the Gospel of Matthew no one knows about the birth of the baby Jesus until the magi show up. As astrologers who were looking to the stars to interpret both present and future events, they noticed something different in nature, something new was happening. They identified it as the birth of a new Jewish king. Yet, no one in Israel, including the Jewish priests, were aware of any changes. When the priests consulted the scriptures it was revealed to them that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Even with the news from the magi, the Jewish priests did not go along with them to see the new Messiah in Bethlehem. Wouldn't you think after all the prophecy that they studied, they would have been at least a little curious? So the magi go alone to Bethlehem as the supposed emissaries of the Jewish King Herod who really is threatened by the news of a new king.

Their visit was special. In fact it was a holy moment. When the star stopped over the place where Jesus was, they fell to their knees and worshipped the child. These educated, powerful, wealthy men humbled themselves by laying prostrate on the dirt floor of a peasant family before a child. Then they gave very generous gifts. The peasant girl, Mary, probably never saw any gold, frankincense and myrrh, much less received any. These gifts seem like appropriate gifts for a king, but not a peasant child. All three gifts were very expensive and still are. Gold is for kings. Frankincense is a natural incense from dried sap of certain Middle Eastern trees. It was burned as incense to make the king's palaces smell good. Myrrh was also expensive. It, too, comes from tree sap and was used for medicinal purposes and in embalming. They do not seem like practical gifts for a peasant child, but they may have provided the means for the peasant

couple, Mary and Joseph to escape to Egypt when Herod orders all the boys under the age of two to be killed. Even though the gifts were extravagant, no material gifts can match the gift God gave to humankind in this child. This statement is a type of epiphany.

The word, epiphany, means something is revealed. Each year we look in this story to see what is revealed to us. The magi were seeking and hoping to find the Messiah. They did, but were hoping for a different reception in Israel, a nation hoping for a messiah, a nation which missed and ignored what was revealed to them in their backyard. Israel had a history of self-indulgent kings who cared more about accumulating power and wealth, than caring for their subjects. Psalm 72 tells us that they were seeking a king who would be fair to everyone, care for the poor rather than take from them, bring peace by crushing the oppressors, save the children, and have compassion on the weak and the needy. This was their hope that they would have a king that would bring hope to those who needed help, to those in need. And when this hope was revealed, they missed it. The magi saw it and did something about it. They sacrificed their time and financial resources to make a trek of about 1000 miles to find this revealed hope in the Son of God, worship him, and give him gifts. The magi were the first spiritual seekers and believers.

Is this hope in Jesus still revealed to us today? Do we still need saving? I would answer, “Yes,” to both these questions. Like the magi who were spiritual seekers, we still have those who are seeking spiritually to connect with the holy through astrology, psychic readers, and various expressions of Eastern religions. All are seeking to find that connection that provides hope. They are people who are hurting, people who seek spiritual direction, people who are in need. Jesus stated in the Gospel of Matthew that all who seek will find. And our amalgamated Christmas story with both the shepherds and the magi welcomes all to the manger, the poor, despised, the Jew, the rich, the educated, the wealthy, the non-Jew.

How can we as a church, the representatives of Christ be sensitive to those who are seeking hope? Are we like the Jewish priests who knew scriptures, but weren't able to act on them? Or are we a star of hope shining like a beacon to those who are seeking hope, to those who are hurting, and in need? We have these monthly events which we call “Something Happening at Salem.” We have tried to find subject matter that people in our community might be interested in and invite them to come onto our property to receive new information. We have scheduled a program on the Underground Railroad, a parent's night out, two programs on birds: attracting and watching, and program about FDR. All of these are great ways to connect with people in our community. But I keep coming back to what the Jewish people were hoping for- a king that would help those who were hurting. I am also reminded that Jesus healed the sick and welcomed those who were outcasts in society. When he saw a need, he met that need. So I ask us, “Who are the ones in our neighborhoods who need hope? Who is hurting in our community? What are their needs? And how can Salem be a beacon of hope to these?” Parents who are struggling with raising children in this age of social media. How can we encourage them? There is an opioid epidemic. How can we provide education and help to those concerned and those effected by this epidemic? There are many who are struggling with cancer and many who are struggling with grief. How can we listen to them and offer them hope? Jesus' ministry thrived when he offered hope to those who were hopeless. And the early church continued this message of hope by caring for the poor and hurting. Their numbers grew because they were a beacon of hope even in the midst of severe persecution.

We are in a New Year which brings the hope of new beginnings. We claim that Jesus is the Hope of the World. How is the hope of Christ revealed to us as the church? How will we seek those who need hope and how will we offer them hope? And when we do then something will really be happening at Salem. Would you pray with me that we are open to new ways of offering hope to people who need it?

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds.

