

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Dr. Thomas P. Harp

January 6, 2008

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

What the Magi Knew

Matthew 2:1-12

The wise men approached the manger to offer their gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh ... and Myrrh! If you were here at the unrehearsed Christmas pageant a couple of weeks ago, you heard that familiar line with that unfamiliar repeat. No, we didn't have four wise men. We had the traditional three, dressed in their royal finery. But one of the three was so caught up in the magic of the moment, he forgot what he was doing. We don't know whether it was stage fright, or if he was distracted while waving to his grandmother. But Mr. McDonald broke the spell by firmly repeating the prompt... and myrrh! Everybody enjoyed the moment as visions of sugarplums dancing in the child's head dispersed and he quickly gave his gift of myrrh to the baby Jesus. It was a pleasant twist to a familiar story.

Speaking of familiar stories, sometimes I think we're too familiar with this Christmas story. Like that little boy we get so caught up in the magic of the story that we miss its very pointed political and religious implications. There are two kings in the story. You know that means trouble. There is never room for more than one king. You can't serve God and money, Jesus once said, as if to reinforce that. Only one God is to be worshiped and obeyed. Only one king can claim our loyalty. Neither Herod nor Caesar fit the bill. Everybody knows that means trouble.

King Herod is the kind of king we're all too familiar with, the kind that has been corrupted by power, the kind of king who uses his power to coerce and control. By contrast, Jesus is a seemingly powerless king who commands loyalty by his character and by his love for the people. Yet by that very fact, he threatens those who use power to suit their own ends. Indeed, Herod is so afraid of him that he determines to kill him. This simple story makes it clear that the true king is Jesus. We are to worship and serve him as the Magi do. It also makes it clear there is trouble ahead for Jesus, and by implication, for those who follow him. No wonder the Magi chose to go home by another way. Herod would not tolerate their paying homage to Jesus.

The magi, themselves, were not kings, but seers, which probably means they were spiritually wise men. It's a good bet they were astrologers. But we can call them kings if we want to. After all, "We Three Astrologers from Orient Are" doesn't sing well. Nowadays, though lots of people read horoscopes every day, astrologers are regarded with some suspicion. In those days Astrologers were honored scientists. They believed changes in the stars signaled important events on earth. So when the star of Bethlehem appeared they set out to see what it signified. In doing so they fulfilled Isaiah's prophesy that we read this morning, "Nations (or Gentiles) shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

What do you know! Gentiles from a foreign land came seeking the king of the Jews in fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. That echoes Luke's story that Augustus, Emperor of Rome and leader of the world's only superpower, was merely a puppet in God's hand when he ordered the census that drew Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Interesting, don't you think, that people who do not worship God are still under God's command. They may not worship the God we worship, but they serve him without even knowing it. What kind of God is this that Kings and Magi serve at his beck and

call? That same God sent his son to be born of a poor family in a strange place. That same God provided for his safe upbringing to fulfill his mission of saving the world.

Can't help but wonder what the Magi expected from a new king of the Jews. Were they simply religious tourists sneaking a peek at the savior God had sent? It's doubtful that they knew the Scriptures that promised a new king like David. Yet they saw signs in the heavens that all was right with the world. And they wanted to see for themselves what that might mean. What was it that Isaiah had in mind when he wrote that prophecy? Perhaps he had in mind a kingdom founded on justice and righteousness. Maybe he envisioned a nation where people of great diversity worked together for the common good, where people were judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin, to borrow from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech.

Isn't that what we want as well? Isn't that what our ancestors set out to build? "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." If so, we must understand that the pathway to fulfilling that vision is not the pathway of Herod or Caesar. The pathway to that kind of kingdom is not the pathway of force or coercion. No! The pathway to the fulfillment of that vision is through Jesus, the Christ, the light of the world.

To be sure, in this world where Herod and Caesar still hold sway, where the way of terror and violence still are chosen as means to an end, we who look to the light of Christ must be vigilant. But the Magi knew that after kneeling at the feet of Jesus they needed to find an alternate route. They could no longer travel the way of Herod. We live in Herod's violent world, a world that is frightened of this new king. It does not know what to do with a king that turns away from the way of violence and calls his disciples to do the same. But we do. We devote ourselves to serving this new king. We seek in all that we do to follow his way, not demanding that others join us, not seeking to coerce them in any way. Instead we seek to live faithfully in the light of Christ. Doing so is not easy, but it is the pathway of hope. Indeed, Christ's way is the only way this world will be saved.