

Tomorrow is January 6th which is the 12th and final day of Christmas. Our culture and our lives, however, have now moved past Christmas and we are focused on other things. My hunch is that most of us have taken down the Christmas decorations. The toys you or your children received may have already lost their Christmas morning luster.

Nobody is demanding now that store clerks wish you “Merry Christmas.” Even the local Christian radio station and the easy listening radio station are no longer playing Christmas music. Many of us have either returned to work or will return to work tomorrow. Schools open back up tomorrow to the chagrin of some teenagers who are here today who can no longer sleep until noon. Yes, it is time to move on into 2014.

But we at Allison Creek are not moving past Christmas yet. That is because today we are taking part in celebrating the ancient celebration of Epiphany. The feast of the Epiphany started in the Eastern Christian Church in honor of the baptism of Jesus. It was introduced in the West in the fourth century, where it came to be associated with the visit of the magi or the wise men. The word “Magi” comes from the Greek word used to describe these men who come seeking.

In some parts of the world families exchange gifts on January 6th because Epiphany celebrates the giving of gifts. For a while the Western Church celebrated Christmas on December 25th while the Eastern Church celebrated Christmas on January 6th. Can you imagine in our culture today telling kids that they cannot open their presents until January 6th?

With this back ground in mind let us now turn to **Matthew 2:1-12** and read about these men who come seeking and what they find.

As I read this story, ask yourself, how many are there? Is there any mention of them being kings? Where are they from? What are their names? What is their role in this drama? And who is the central character in this story that the plot revolves around?

In reading this story you may have noticed that we don't know how many came. There were three gifts but we are never told that there were 3 men. The gifts they bring are symbolic of a king, a divine ruler, and a burial. The men are not named. Calling them Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar does not come from the Bible but from Christian tradition.

Saying that these men were kings comes from an interpretation of Psalm 72 in the Old Testament which describes kings bearing gifts who bow down to a king. Matthew never calls them kings. Matthew calls them "Magi." And they probably come from Persia which would be modern day Iraq or Iran.

So who were these guys? The wise men were probably spies. When we had the Christmas pageant here a few weeks ago, the three boys dressed up as the wise men did not look like spies. They were actually pretty cute when they brought these three gifts to the manger. Of course, in the nativity play two of the boys kept their gifts and never left them at the manger. But if you actually read the text from Matthew, the wise men really were international spies.

The heavenly event that they noticed in the sky was a sign to them that something special was happening. Was this event a threat to their empire? For someone to come "from the East" was not usually a welcoming event. For men to come from the East meant that they were probably scouting out the territory to find out what was happening in a neighboring empire.

These wise men end up at King Herod's court. King Herod is probably pretty anxious as he sees this celestial event taking place. Is this a sign from heaven that something is happening that is going to overthrow his reign? Herod wants answers.

But Herod knows that sending an army after a bright light in the sky is not good strategy. They would not know what they were following. An army would probably get lost.

But even though Herod is probably suspicious of the motives of these wise men, Herod needs these astrologers to gather the necessary information. Herod needs these wise men to act as his political spies. This event begins with political intrigue.

And so with all of this political posturing, the wise men set out to find what the star is leading them toward. They seek with impure motives. They were probably spies for their own empire as well as spies for Herod's empire.

But do you remember the first action they take upon meeting the Christ? Do they offer gifts first? No they do not. The first act of the wise men upon encountering the Christ is to pay him homage. They bow down and worship him.

They worship him and then they offer their gifts. Worship and then response by giving of an offering. And then what happens next in the story? The wise men are told in a dream to return to their own country by another route.

The wise men were led to Jesus by impure motives. They were probably spies working for empires seeking to overthrow a threat to the power of these empires. But they met the Christ and they were transformed. They met the Christ and they were changed.

We may have come to worship today for impure motives. Maybe we came because it is Sunday and we have always come to church on Sunday. We do live in the South where church attendance is still expected. Maybe we feel obligated to be here for some reason. Maybe we came because our parents told us we needed to come even though we wanted to sleep in one more day before school started back tomorrow.

Maybe we are here because we need to expand our business interests and we are hoping to make some contacts. Maybe we are here to make the right kind of friends for ourselves and our children. Maybe we are here because of some ulterior motive which may not be very godly.

Today is a day we are ordaining and installing elders. The people serving on Session may have accepted the call because the person who asked them was a friend of theirs, maybe they felt guilty, maybe they accepted because of some other reason.

Whatever the reason for coming to church or for accepting the call to become an elder, the story of the Wise Men teach us that it does not matter what brings us to this point. What matters is what do we do now that we are here?

Do we allow ourselves to encounter the Christ and to allow him to transform us? Do we allow him to welcome us by whatever road we have arrived on and to show us the different path that we are to now take?

We are invited this morning to bow before Christ and pay him homage. To worship the Christ and to offer him our whole selves. To seek to be different. To seek to be transformed. How we got here does not matter. But how we leave here does matter.

Are we going to leave here going back to our old ways? Herod wants us to come back to him. Herod wants us to come back to the chaos and fear and anxiety and evil that he represents. Herod wants us to follow him and not the way of Christ.

Do we still follow Herod's ways? Or do we leave this place following a different road? The road that Christ leads us down which is different than the road that brought us here.

One other interesting aspect to this story. The star in this story disappears after the Wise Men encounter the Christ child. The star does not guide them down the different path they are to take back to their own country. The Wise Men depart on a new path without a star to guide them.

You too can be thankful for whatever light brought you here to this church or to wherever you are in your faith journey.

But after encountering Christ, it may be time to journey without that light and to begin a journey ahead where Christ instead is your guide. AMEN.

-I am thankful for the outline of the sermon of Thompson, Barkley, "Whose Side Are We On?", and found at http://day1.org/5466-whose_side_are_we_on

-Given: January 5, 2014 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Unison Prayer of Confession

Dear God of Epiphany, we come to worship you today in truth but our motives (like Herod's) are not pure. We want you to reward us because we are here, and not someplace else. We want you to gift us with health, with wealth, with answers to our questions. We want you to overlook our unfaithfulness, rather than shining the bright Light of the Christ Child on our lives.

Forgive us, O God of the Stars, that we are not more like those wise ones of so long ago. In following a star, they found hope; in gifting a child, they received grace; in seeking your signs, they discovered life. Be with us, in mercy and hope, as we journey with your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, in this season of Light. Hear all our prayers that we offer up to you this day.

Prayers of the People

At the edge of chaos you spoke, O God, and created out of your imagination
rivers which could carve canyons, flowers which could hibernate in winter's embrace,
and stars which could lead the wise and the ordinary to a simple manger.
You have shaped us in your image, breathing your Spirit into us so we might have life
with you. In Jesus Christ our Lord we find the Bright Star of every morning. When we
kept our eyes cast down, he came to lift our heads to see our sisters on our right,
and our brothers on our left. When we wondered about our lives,
he came to point us to those ahead of us whom we are called to serve,
to those behind us who mentored us in our faith.

As we celebrate the Light coming into our world,
as we journey with the wise and the foolish,
we speak of that mystery we call faith:

As we venture forth into new adventures in 2014, we pray for your wisdom and
guidance. Sometimes the path after meeting you is not always clearly marked by a
bright light. Help us to be steady and faithful in the journey to find the direction that you
are calling each one of us to go.

Introduction to Ordination:

We are all called into the church of Jesus Christ by baptism, and marked as Christ's own by the Holy Spirit.

This is our common calling, to be disciples and servants of our servant Lord.

Within the community of the church, some are called to particular service as and as ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

Ordination is Christ's gift to the church, assuring that his ministry continues among us, providing for ministries of caring and compassion in the world, ordering the governance of the church, and preaching the Word and administering the sacraments.

Laying on of hands. Priesthood of all believers.

Prayer for Ordination

God of grace, pour out your Holy Spirit on Katrin, that she may be your faithful elder in the church.

Give her sound judgment, wisdom and courage to order the life of the church in obedience to your Word.

Nourish her in the life of the Holy Spirit, that she may exercise the ministry of discipline with humility and compassion. Guide her on this session as a servant leader following Christ who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life to set others free.

Give her joy in her walk of faith and a sure sense of your abiding presence for her work of ministry. We pray that the rest of us offer her support and encouragement so that she can be effective as an elder. We pray for her family as they are partners to make their own sacrifices so that she can serve in this capacity.