

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Christmas January 4, 2009
Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas
Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84:1-8

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

Following the Star

Dear God, happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way. *Amen.*

Who are the Wise Men?

Nobody knows. Some scholars say they were Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Others say they were Babylonian astrologers. Still others say they were astronomers or philosophers. Despite the familiar hymn, "We Three Kings," the Gospel never tells us that they were kings or that there were three of them -- all it says is that "wise men from the east" [Mt 2:1] brought three gifts for the Christ child. Matthew's Gospel -- the only Gospel in which these travelers appear -- also does not mention their names or their homeland. We can only guess whether they travelled from Arabia or Mesopotamia, or from lands even further beyond. It was later Christian tradition that decided that there were three of them and that they were kings, and supplied them with names, physical descriptions, camels, and even the dates of their deaths. Their relics are said to have reached Cologne by the middle of the 12th century!

There is a lot that we don't know about these travelers, but we do know this: the men are wise. I wonder what makes them wise. What *is* wisdom, anyway? I wonder if the story of the wise men can give us some clues about wisdom as we embark on our own journey into a new year. Maybe the wise men have a gift to give to us as well as to the Christ child.

Here's what I see. One sign of wisdom: the men are on the move, on a search. However much they already know -- and they are called "wise" from the very start of the story, for evidently they have already learned a great deal-- they want to know more. They know what they know, but they also know that there is much that they don't know. There are truths that we can learn only when we move beyond our comfort zone, and maybe the quest for truth, the quest for God will always take us beyond ourselves, out of a fixed place -- our comfortable homeland -- and to a place that is new. Wise men and wise

women have the humility to admit that they don't know everything there is to know, and are open to learning more.

So I see boldness in the wise men: they have the courage to set out to an unknown place, because they are fired with a desire to seek the truth. And I see humility in them, too, for to undertake such a journey they must be willing to ask questions (even directions!), to get lost sometimes, to make mistakes, to not know exactly where they are heading or what they will find when they get there. They have to be open to surprise, and heaven knows, the king they seek will turn out to be unlike any other king that they have ever known. The only way to find him is to keep their eyes on the star and to follow the road to God, wherever it leads.

And where does their journey take them? Right into the center of the City of Jerusalem, right into the very presence of King Herod, that brutal, desperate, fear-filled king who wants to cling to power. Herod recognizes in this newborn baby a threat to his rule, and he sets out to do the baby in. At first he works in secret, with sweet talk and lies: he gathers information about the child under the pretense of wanting to pay homage to him, that is, to bow down to the child in worship. He tries to trick the wise men into showing him where the baby can be found. Later on, when these covert operations fall through, Herod unleashes his brutality: he orders his soldiers to kill every child in or around Bethlehem who is two years old or under, and Mary and Joseph must scoop up the baby Jesus and take flight with him to Egypt.

In the midst of Herod's rage and fear, what do the wise men do? They keep their eyes on the star. They resume their journey. They get back on the road and follow where the star is guiding them. And when they reach their destination, they are "overwhelmed with joy" [Mt 2:10]. They enter the house, they see the child with Mary, they kneel in adoration, and they offer their gifts. When dream and intuition tell them that God does not want them to return to Herod, they go home by a different road.

Wisdom -- it's all about wisdom. Stay awake, the wise men seem to tell us. There is evil in this world. The voice of Herod is all around us and within us, speaking words of violence and fear, voices that say: Strike. Destroy. Starve. Kill. Voices that say: the only way to peace is to dominate and obliterate, to silence your enemy and to do everything possible to wipe him out. No, the wise men say. Keep your eyes on the star. Keep your eyes on God and bear witness to love. Follow where love is leading you, even if it takes you right into the heart of the world's suffering and fear, but keep your eyes on the star. If Herod's voice of hatred tries to coax you back to him, stay on the path of love, the path of peace. Do not return to Herod, but go home by a different road.

This story comes as a gift to us as we enter a new year and take stock of a world so torn by turbulence and hatred. It has been a terrible week in Gaza, with images of fire and blood, rockets and rubble, the sound of shrieks and the smell of fear. As Israeli warplanes pound Hamas targets in Gaza, as Hamas rockets explode in residential areas of Israel, as Israeli troops and tanks cross the border and begin a ground offensive, how in this turmoil and anguish do we keep our eyes on the star? How do we apply our hearts to wisdom? The tangled roots of today's conflict in the Middle East wind far back into ancient history and deep into the psyche of Arabs and Jews. Who knows where the conflict first began? It seems to have gone on forever, as if it sprang straight from our mythic ancestors, Cain and Abel. In the long years since, both sides have inflicted great suffering on each other, and both sides have endured great suffering, experiencing their own slaughter of the innocents. Both sides have made mistakes, and members of both sides have been driven by fear and rage to the desperate conviction that only violence and retaliation will keep their children safe.

Can we who watch this horror keep our eyes on the star? Can we find ways to call forth the good that is in both sides, to embrace the wisdom that is in both sides, to help each side to look up and see again the star that is shining above them, and shining still within them? The light that is in us is so much brighter than we know, and for all the darkness that surrounds us -- for all violence and the clamor for revenge that fill the world around, for all the fear and hatred that may fill our own hearts, too -- for all the Herods around us and within us that counsel rage or despair -- the star of love is still shining. We must keep our eyes on that star.

What can we do?

We can try to stop the killing, try to stop both sides from tearing each other apart, and call for a ceasefire.

We can send aid to Gaza, and in your leaflet there is information about how to send money to the Al Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, which is run by the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, and where the suffering and need are great.¹

We can call for vigorous diplomacy to secure a just and lasting peace with a two-state solution, so that both Israelis and Palestinians can achieve the security that both sides so need and deserve. Your leaflet tells you how to sign

¹ Send your donation to American Friends of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem (AFEDJ), Box 2040, Orange CA 92859 or visit www.americanfriends-jerusalem.org to donate on-line.

the Ecumenical Christian Letter to President-Elect Obama, which urges just that.²

And we can pray - pray that the light of God will enlighten all hearts, pray that God's mercy and justice will prevail, pray that the suffering will ease and that all peoples will find their path to peace. Next Wednesday we will begin a five-week series on the Holy Land, and I pray that in our discussions -- as in everything else we do, wherever we find ourselves, wherever we go -- I pray that we will listen with the open-heartedness and humility of the wise men, who, in their quest for truth, were open to learning what they did not know and who, even in the midst of trouble, always kept their eyes on the star.

Let us pray.

O Jesus, be with us as we travel into the fullness of God, that, following your star, we may not wander in the darkness of this world's night, but may find in you a home, and, as the wise men did, may come at last to kneel before you, overwhelmed with joy.³ *Amen.*

² For more information and to sign, visit:

http://action.cmep.org/t/4030/petition.jsp?petition_KEY=173

³ Adapted from *Mozarabic Sacramentary*, as cited in *Prayers for Every Occasion*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1967, p. 42.