

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church      Pinole, CA

The Second Sunday after Christmas: January 3, 2021

“Symbols of the Wise Men and God’s Bigger Plan”

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Good Morning and Happy New Year. We made it. Another year hopefully starting out on the difficult side but moving to a more comfortable and happier end.

I have to say being in lockdown has allowed people to get creative. In case you haven’t heard the latest about today’s scriptures it goes something like: “*We three kings of Orient are, we’ll ‘Purell’ before we depart. As suggested we’ve been tested; careful are we and smart.*” But all joking aside, today’s scripture has a lot to say.

As I started my sermon over Christmas to include the birth of Jesus with the narrative being less about us, and more about showing how God works in the world, so I again lean in that direction. Not so much about us, but more about God and his great plans.

I touch on this subject because last Tuesday was the Feast Day of the Holy Innocents. Although our liturgical calendar sets that feast day before our wise men visit, the result of the Christ child being born and recognized by the royalty of other nations made Herod crazy enough to kill innocent children.

Yes, there is no way to make beautiful that story or properly respond to the death of innocent children during the search for the infant Jesus. The collateral damage is great. It is also an easy way to just blame Herod as an egotistical nut job, but there is more at play than what meets the eye, and it begins with the visiting wise men. You can only understand Herod’s reaction after you understand the historic implications. After Jesus was born, Wise Men came to look for Him, probably from an area which is now in either Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Yemen, or an area in what's now southern Turkey, or northern Syria.

These were certainly men of great learning. The word Magi comes from the Greek word “*magos*” (where the English word 'magic' comes from.) *Magos* itself comes from the old Persian word “*Magupati*”. This was the title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions - today we'd called them astrologers. Back then astronomy and astrology were part of the same overall study and considered “science” at that time.

This tells us that God’s plan invites science into the great mystery. It shows us that the omnipotent God and Father of all is glad to share all of his creation and its wonders with humankind. Science enhances an understanding of His wonders. In Jesus’s day, the most knowledgeable people (as represented here in this story) are recognizing the incarnation: Emmanuel, God with us. Later tellings of the story identified the magi by name and identified their lands of origin. Again a better understanding shows us how God works in a much broader aspect that we can ever realize.

Gaspar or Caspar, is depicted as having brown hair and a brown beard (or no beard) and wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels on it. He is the King of Sheba. Gaspar represents the Frankincense brought to Jesus.

Melchior, who is described with long white hair and a white beard and wears a gold cloak is the King of Arabia. Melchior represents the Gold brought to Jesus.

Balthazar, represented as a black man with a black beard (or no beard) wears a purple cloak. He is the King of Tarsus/Macedonia and Egypt. Balthazar represents the gift of Myrrh that was brought to Jesus.

Who these wise men were and where they were from is important. The countries they represented had all at one time enslaved, or caused havoc for the Hebrew people. Yet they came to recognize the Jewish-awaited Messiah.

We see that God is not just working in the small town of Bethlehem, or with just the Hebrew people. We have the Divinity of Jesus being recognized by the scientific world. The previous rulers of countries that enslaved the Hebrew people are now honoring the Messiah. We also have gifts that may tell us they have seen into Jesus's future and have some understanding of the grand plan that includes Jesus's death. Gold signified Jesus's status as "King of the Jews;" frankincense represented the infant's divinity and identity as the Son of God; and myrrh touched upon Jesus's mortality.

God is laying before the Holy Family the whole plan of salvation in a very tangible and symbolic way. And when the wise men leave, Herod goes on a killing spree to murder all the infants as he searches for Jesus. So the question I always ponder is what about the innocent and what about the collateral damage? I bring this up because we are in a New Year, but also at a crossroads as to what kind of faith we have, and if it is strong enough to get us through whatever comes next. The Holy Family and the lovely stories of the wise men are quickly followed by a great tragedy. I would love to say I had an answer to all the tough questions. I would like to know how God sets forth a way to publicly acknowledge his son, which also by de facto puts not only Jesus but also many innocent children in danger. Why do we have a pandemic, and again so many innocent die? And this is where our faith comes in.

This is where I have to look at the pages of my Bible and see that there is a pattern to God's work. There is a redeeming, a Holy way to this Being we refer to as God, and we are constantly shown that there is a great and amazing plan for humankind. But we have only a very limited understanding about the way the whole thing works. Yet the infant Jesus survived and did what God set him out to do. He is, was, and always will be our Savior. Jesus himself, becomes collateral damage, a sacrifice, a Holy Innocent.

The story of the wise men is God's way of reminding us that there is a bigger picture. There will be at times collateral damage, things will happen that we don't understand; however God's plan will remain true. Our wise men show us that even those not involved in the Hebrew story recognize the Divinity of Jesus. God is already sharing salvation around the globe at Jesus's birth. Even Herod for all his ugliness and murderous ways could not stop God's plan of salvation for us.

I leave you with these ruminations on this first Sunday of 2021, as we remember all the Holy Innocents we have lost this year. I encourage you to remember in faith that God is with us, even in the tragedies. Even if we can't see or understand the bigger picture. There is ugliness still around, but that will not stop God's plan for us.

We recognize today just as the wise men did, Jesus's Divinity, his Kingship, His Mortality, and His resurrection. We read this story about the wise men with 20/20 hindsight. We can look up the Hebrew scriptures, we can search historic documents, we can use science and even speculate as to what exactly caused the star to shine. But we can't see God's complete plan. We can't fathom what He is in the process of creating. Yes, we can see collateral damage, and no, I don't have any answers except that my faith calls me to believe (after what I have experienced in my life) that God is always with those who are in peril or who die. I can't see God's complete plan, but I have faith that there is one.

I ask you to check on how your faith is doing this new year. Do you trust in God? And that is what I believe to be the most important question during these tough times. Can you have faith that there is a bigger picture? Can you imagine God is still at work in His salvation of the world? Faith is the question, but also the answer, and faith that there is a bigger picture will get us a better new year. Amen.