

Matthew 2: 1-12 “Jesus is Lord of us all, thank God!” 12/27/20

Isaiah 60: 1-6

One of my favorite things to learn about the Wise Men or Three Kings, as some call them, is that their 3 gifts, while very appropriate gifts for royalty, were also very practical gifts for Jesus and his family – particularly when the Holy Family needed to flee to Egypt not long after his birth. I posted a cartoon on Facebook that I got from my husband of the Wise Men talking to each other while on their road trip to Bethlehem. One says to the other, “**Why** did you bring Frankincense?” And the other responds, “Who gives myrrh to a **baby**?!” Well, as it turns out, myrrh is not just for funeral embalming, although it was used for that. It is also a very useful analgesic, as well as a useful ointment for diaper rash! And Frankincense, while the best incense for worship in a temple, is also useful for stomach trouble, and has antibacterial properties. Gold, as we all know, would be very saleable anywhere, so the Holy Family would not then need to find a bank to change money when arriving as immigrants in Egypt! A friend of mine posted another Christmas cartoon this one showing three wise women arriving after the wise men, bringing casseroles, diapers, and wine...all very useful gifts, too! Another of my favorite Christmas stories, Amahl and the Night Visitors, includes a song about the gifts the shepherds brought when they visited the Holy Family – “olives and quinces, nutmeg and raisins”...and the list goes on of simple gifts, portable foods and spices they would have and could use or sell as needed. I am thinking that the Holy family could use all the wise folks available to gather around Jesus and help care for them, especially given their imminent road trip to Egypt. Pastor Mary Gay will tell us more about that adventure next week!

We are not so unlike the Wise Men this year I think, in that we too are travelling through strange lands, searching for our Lord in this wilderness pandemic. The Wise Men are following a bright star to get to a newborn king, perhaps the king of kings in their world. While they are educated priests of astrology perhaps, and from Persia possibly, they would find themselves in many unknown environments and cultures where people speak languages they don't know and have customs different from theirs. The Wise Men would be seen as exotic and unwelcome outsiders in some settings. It was a courageous choice, and one made with much conviction to follow the star to Bethlehem, and stay the course through difficult experiences! And when they arrive, they offer gifts and their worship to the baby Jesus.

We are travelling through some unfamiliar lands and experiences this year, aren't we? We are traveling through a wormhole of time where every day is like the other, as we stay at home to stay safe...we are traveling through worship and church activities in digital bubbles, practicing our faith isolated from our usual companions...we are traveling through work, school and community connecting only digitally with others if at all...and, we are traveling through cyberspace where many of us do not know the digital languages of zoom, youtube, nor do we understand dropbox or wifi, webcams and green screens! It feels like we are all muted, all the time! Sometimes we wonder if our voices matter, if our time, work, homework, worship make any difference in this year of the cyberspace wilderness. And yet... here we are this Christmas,

traveling to Bethlehem, with the goal of seeing Jesus the newborn king, offering our gifts and our hearts to this one we call our Lord and Savior. We too, hope to love God and love our neighbor, as did these Wise Ones so long ago, and thank God, we are finding that we can do all these things still, even if a little differently, in a digital landscape.

This is because Jesus is Lord over all time, over all space (even cyberspace!), over all work, over all worship... He chooses to enter our time and space, time and again, to show us God's Way...he is found in every space, by those who seek him, and he blesses all work and worship done in his name, so that it can bless still others. While the story of the Magi reminds us that God comes to be with all people in Jesus' birth-- Jews and foreigners--, it also reminds us that all peoples, and even all religions, can point us toward God. Blessed are all who follow the star God provides, and who give generously to God's Love, born to save us all! This one born, Jesus, is Lord of us all. He teaches us how to live and celebrate God's generous love in our lives in every nation, in every time, in every space. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, the Bread of Life, the Truth we are seeking, the Way of Life Everlasting. How are we following our Lord and Savior, God-with-us, God's Christmas incarnation through this pandemic digital wilderness?

We are all learning how to be together while apart, to ensure everyone's safety. I like the way one put it "We stay apart this year, so we can ALL gather together next year!" It IS harder to feel God's incarnate love when we cannot share hugs, hold hands, pat shoulders, and see smiles of those outside our family. But there are other ways we can experience God's love incarnated this year. We give thanks for familiar faces we see as we serve our Lord at church meetings on zoom and in our online worship! And we give thanks for creative leaders who figure out how we can give to God's mission safely, from our cars...we give thanks for all who helped us celebrate Jesus' nativity outside with animals, holy family and shepherds, angelic music and God's Word from scripture...and for all who gave generously to help other families be blessed through Heifer Project International. These are some of the ways we as a church have followed our Lord through the pandemic wilderness.

Mary and Joseph were poor, and soon to be homeless exiles, immigrants in Egypt. Jesus our Lord reminds us that what we do for the least of these, we are doing for him. He tells us we will meet him in the wilderness with others, as we share his gifts and his love so that all of us come out well on the other side. We are the incarnation of God's love today, as we follow God's star to the poor and suffering in our day.

One of my favorite Christmas poems was written by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, theologian, pastor and professor:

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all, to make music in the heart.”

I believe Jesus and God are calling us especially during this pandemic, to visit the stables and mangers of in our world today, where the poor are struggling and suffering: through UNICEF and UMCOR we can give gifts to those in places of danger and devastation; through the Northern Illinois Food Bank and Salvation Army we can give groceries to those who are in need; we can give casseroles to Lazarus House, to Hased House, and even to our own neighbors who are struggling. We can give our hearts through cards, phone calls, and outdoor distanced visits with those who are lonely, and alone at home...In these ways and others, we as Christians and as a church, demonstrate that Jesus is our Lord, and Lord of us all.

In our Incarnation discussion last Sunday, Nancy Lillie commented that the pandemic has taken away the luxury of thinking that going to church on Sunday fulfills our Christian obligations. I believe she is right: now, we have to be more intentional about living our faith every day! How will we worship, study and serve others, to grow and show our faith in Jesus, our Lord? How are we demonstrating that Jesus is our Lord, who leads us and guides us, walks with us and talks with us, who loves us and ALL others through us? This is our Christmas work! To show as well as tell the world, that God is with us, and Jesus is our Lord, in deeds as well as words!

So let us go now, to show and tell others this Good News, with our hearts and hands and voices: that Jesus is the Light of our World, and God-with and for us all!--. Amen!

Rev Lisa Telomen
Associate Pastor, UMC of Geneva

CHILDREN’S SERMON 12 27 20

Merry Christmas still!

When we read in the Gospel of Matthew about the Wise Men who came to visit Jesus, it is interesting to note that these people were from another country, and spoke a different language than Jesus’ parents, and were from a different culture and different religion even!

And they made this long trip to come see Jesus and give him gifts, because they believed he was sent by God to become a great leader or king, for all the people of their world! What amazing people, with great faith in God's care for the whole world!

Jesus showed us as he grew up, that he **was** sent by God to care for the whole world – and he did just that, in wonderful ways. The Christmas stories remind us, too, though, that the whole world cared for Jesus at his birth: Matthew tells us that these people from different lands and faiths came; Luke tells us shepherds from his own country came. And all of these people, and even the animals, helped Jesus to feel loved and cared for when he was born and his life with us began.

There's a Christmas song I like to sing that reminds me how each of the animals, and each of us too, have important ways to care for Jesus, and for each other too: It's called The Friendly Beasts. I encourage you to listen to it on youtube: The Friendly Beasts, sung by Peter Paul & Mary.

It goes like this: (UMH p 227) (Sing first verse)

Jesus, our brother, strong and good, was humbly born in a stable rude;
And the friendly beasts around him stood, Jesus our brother, strong and good.

Then the donkey sang, "I said the donkey, shaggy and brown, I carried his mother uphill and down, I carried his mother to Bethlehem town.

Then the cow all white and red sang, "I gave him my manger for his bed, I gave him hay to pillow his head.

And the sheep with the curly horns sang, "I gave him my wool for his blanket warm, he wore my coat on Christmas morn.

And the doves from the rafter high sang, "We cooed him to sleep that he should not cry."

It's wonderful to remember that each of us has special ways we can love God and love our neighbor. And Jesus and God love it when we do just that, in our own special way!

Let's pray: Thank you God, for coming to live with us in Jesus, and for welcoming everyone at your birth. We are happy to know that all people and all creatures are loved by you, and have special ways to love you and one another. Help us to find safe ways to care for each other and share your love this Christmas, so that everyone can feel your blessings. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.