

Second Sunday after Christmas, Year C – January 5, 2024

**“A Different Road Home”**

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ALL SAINTS EPISCOPAL CHURCH

South Burlington, Vermont

Jeremiah 31:7-14 | Psalm 84:1-8 | Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a | Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate the Epiphany, which comes from a Greek word meaning "showing forth" or "revelation." Epiphany is the climax of the Christmas Season and the Twelve Days of Christmas, and today is the last day. Epiphany is tomorrow on the church calendar, but we're observing it today.

We think of the wise men coming on camels as the last chapter of Jesus' birth narrative, but there is more to the story.

We learned in today's Gospel that the wise men came from the east to Jerusalem because they wanted to pay homage to the child they called the "king of the Jews." They asked King Herod where the new king was, which frightened Herod, because this news could fulfill an ancient prophecy. The wise men knew about this prophecy, too. It came from Isaiah Ch. 60, verse 6, "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Mid'ian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD."

You have probably said these verses during Morning Prayer services. It is one of the canticles, the Third Song of Isaiah on p. 87 of your prayer book. "Arise, shine for your light has come..." This poem was recited to despairing Jews who returned to Jerusalem in 580 BCE. After being in exile for a couple of generations, they returned to a city that had been razed, annihilated. To restore their hope, the prophet Isaiah shared this message: "over you the Lord will rise, and his glory will appear upon you." "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn..." Jerusalem would become a new center of

international trade. God promised to make the city peaceful and prosperous, which was welcome news indeed.

A side note about the word “LORD” often written in capital letters. The ancient writers referred to God with four Hebrew letters, the tetragrammaton, YHWH, but word was never read. Instead, readers substituted “*adonai*” which means Lord. *Adonai* was the way the ancient Hebrew people honored the one God whom they respected and feared too much to give a name.

So far, we’ve established that everybody knew that news of Jesus’ birth might mean a prophecy fulfilled, that a new king was born. King Herod summoned the chief priests and scribes—his wise men—to ask them where the Messiah was to be born. They revealed the place: “In Bethlehem,…” then prophecy they cited was not Isaiah’s. Instead, the chief priests and scribes quoted Micah 5:2-4:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ (Matt 2:6)

This is different from Isaiah’s message that the new king would make Jerusalem a prosperous city. Micah offered a different hope, what the Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann called “the voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and human achievements.” The new leader would restore his people by standing with and feeding his flock, guarding them, and bringing peace, not through economic prosperity or world power.

From Micah:

“And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great

to the ends of the earth;

and he shall be the one of peace.” (Micah 5:4-5)

Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem, ordering them to report back. This Roman Jewish client king feared losing power and when he did not find out where the holy family was, so he retaliated out of fear. Jesus was a sign to be opposed, as Simeon foretold (Luke 2:34). It was so in ancient times, and it remains true today.

The Epiphany story is a story of two communities: Jerusalem with its power and wealth and ambition, and Bethlehem with its modest innocence. The two prophets included in this Gospel by Matthew and his followers seem to say: we can restore peace by being self-sufficient, wealthy, and powerful, like we were before foreigners invaded (that’s Isaiah), or we can restore peace by accepting that we’re not in control, being vulnerable, and trusting that God will protect and provide (that’s Micah).

Another scholar, Frederick Buechner, called out the wise men for paying homage, then heading home, instead of giving themselves and their love to Jesus. If they had stayed, though, Jesus would have been easier for Herod to find. Presumably, the wise men spread the news of the new king’s birth to eastern lands. Furious at their betrayal, Herod ordered every male child two years old and under in the district to be murdered.

This isn’t the Christmas story that most of us shared with the kids in our lives. It’s not the Christmas story any of us read on Christmas eve, and to be honest, it’s not the Christmas story we want to remember. (The lectionary, the book of service readings, leaves out the worst part!), but this genocide is in Scripture, so we can’t ignore it.

If this story were to happen today, we know what the focus of mass media would be. The images would focus on the murders, not on the birth of a baby in a stable with wise men from the east kneeling nearby. I think that’s worth remembering when we hear about a tragedy. Yes, we must pay attention to the violence, learn from it, and act on what we learn,

but we should also remember that for every tragedy, there is another story happening some place out of the media spotlight that brings hope for all humanity.

Walter Brueggemann wrote that, “Our task is to let the vulnerability of Micah 5 disrupt the self-congratulation of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place.” Jerusalem and Bethlehem were only nine miles apart. We’re close, but not on target. This Gospel invites us to travel those nine miles from self-determination and self-sufficiency in search of fame, security and prosperity to a place where we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable, trusting of ourselves, each other, and our shepherd, and beloved by God. After seeing Jesus, the wise men dreamed that they should not return to Herod, so they went home by a different road.

The world is filled with people in power who are not trustworthy. There are many people with good intentions who are manipulated. Too many people experience violence. And, it’s also important to remember that, while these things are happening, God is forming the people in our pews (and those listening at home) to do God’s work in the world.

We receive Paul’s prayer to the Ephesians as though it was meant for us. We pray to know the hope to which Jesus has called us. In hope, God’s mercy and grace are the “true riches.” Believing in God fills us with love and goodness and prepares us to do the work God has given us to do. We pray that the world will not manipulate us, and that we will not live in fear. We pray for the faith to walk those nine miles, then with the “eyes of our hearts enlightened,” to take a different road home.

Listen to Micah 5 in Hebrew.

<https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1060.htm> (read right to left)

<https://mechon-mamre.org/mp3/t1060.mp3> (verse 6 starts at 41 seconds in, but listen throughout for the word *adonai*)