

“An Alternative”

A sermon based on Matthew 2:1-12
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
By David Oliver-Holder
On Sunday, January 6th, 2019

I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Happy New Year! Although Christians have already begun our new liturgical year with the First Sunday of Advent, for many folks the first of January marks an important turning point. Some of us watched the ball drop in New York City, with joy because we could then go to bed before midnight. Some of us have made resolutions, and since we are only six days into the new calendar year, many of us are successfully keeping our resolutions.

All or most of us are hopeful about the days ahead because that just seems to be the best approach. Not optimism, necessarily, but hope. As we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.” (11:1) And as the Apostle Paul wrote,

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Rom. 5:1-6)

Optimism can be too fragile. Hope is stubborn. Hope, along with faith and love, is one of the three things that will last forever.

Thanks be to God for the wisdom of the Liturgical calendar and for all the ways it grounds and nurtures our hope. We have completed our celebration of the Nativity of Jesus. As we heard in the reading from the Gospel of John on Christmas Eve, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” (1:5) The light comes when the night is the longest and darkest, when all other lights have failed.

How wise to celebrate the birth of the Light of the World, just after the winter solstice, the longest night of the year. The liturgical year has never been about historical accuracy. It’s about the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and

keeping sacred time in a way that reminds us over and over about Jesus and the life of faith. The great gift to us, the great aid to our faith, is that the liturgical year uses the seasons of nature to help us. We sing the wisdom of this in “This Is My Father’s World:” “...all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.”

Sacred time uses natural cycles to inspire and teach. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” What better time to appreciate this truth than when the days are so short?

II

Matthew was not the first to talk about rich, eastern intellectuals coming to Jerusalem. That’s the reason our first reading from Isaiah 60 is paired with the reading from Matthew Chapter 2. The poetic vision presented by the prophet was first spoken sometime around the year 580 BCE.ⁱ The time of the Exile of the people of Israel was ending, and they needed encouragement to return.

After two or three generations in exile in what is now Iraq, after heeding the advice of the prophet Jeremiah to settle down, build houses, and plant gardens, we can understand how they would have struggled with the thought of picking up to return to their homeland. How could they not have wanted to return home, you wonder?

Well, none of them had been there in 70 years. When they were forced into exile, Jerusalem had been destroyed, torn down, burned, looted and abandoned. Other cities and towns likely suffered the same fate as the army of Nebuchadnezzar ravaged the landscape.

So, when Third Isaiah offered these words, the first wave of refugees who returned after exile saw the ruins, realized what they were up against, and they were feeling despair. Who wants to live in cities or towns or communities where civic institutions don’t work or don’t exist, where there is no economy, and where no one knows where to begin?

Into that darkness, the brilliant poetic prophet shined just the light they need to see. His words cast just the vision the people needed to hear. “Arise, shine; for your light has come!” The cities and the towns and the land will once again be productive and prosperous. Commerce will return. Their homeland will once again be a place that kings will want to visit.

Who knows how they knew it, but our rich intellectuals from the east knew about this vision of Isaiah proclaiming a time of peace and prosperity. They had to be hopeful people to latch on to this vision, and they had to pay attention to the natural world to know when to set out.

Many have been the mystics who have written about the centrality of attentiveness in the life of faith, the ordinary everydayness of paying attention and staying woke. That's one trait I love about the Magi. They were informed and hoping and paying attention and waiting. And when the sign, the star, appeared in the night sky, of course, they were the first to see it.

They set out and followed the sign to the city of Jerusalem, the ancient Hebrew capitol, the city of the throne of the king. Jerusalem was also the site of the Temple. Though they were foreigners far from home, they certainly would have felt comfortable being in a capitol city that was the center of political and religious life, with all of its trappings of wealth and privilege and power.

Just like many of us well-to-do, sophisticated people, they thought that they would find God's anointed one in a place where they would expect to find someone kinda like them. A king has power. A king has wealth. At that time, the king would be at the center of religious life, too. The rich, eastern intellectuals thought they had come to the right place.

Well, word got out about this impressive caravan arriving in the city of Jerusalem. Herod, the reigning king, sent emissaries to the Waldorf Astoria to arrange a meeting. When Herod learned at the meeting that they were seeking a king, a king who was obviously not him, he perceived a threat. A new king was a threat to an old king and an old order.

Out of fear, Herod first tried to determine whether the rich, eastern intellectuals knew what they were talking about. So, he summoned his biblical scholars and said, "Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is this about gold and frankincense and camel caravans?"

This was when an amazing thing happened. The biblical scholars told the reigning king, "You have the wrong text. And the wise men outside are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and

have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. In that scenario, the urban elites can recover their former power and prestige and nothing will really change.”ⁱⁱ

Herod, still not sure he was liking any of this, said loudly, “What? Well is there another, a better text?”

Even though the biblical scholars were afraid of the anger of the king, who had demonstrated no qualms about killing anyone who might be a threat to him, they told the king what they knew. “The right text is Micah 5:2-4.” “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from of old.”

Micah offered an alternative vision, a more recent vision. His was not the sophisticated, well-to-do voice of the capitol city, but the more humble voice of Bethlehem, the House of Bread, the basic source of food on which we all depend. His was the voice of the Bread Basket.

Micah was not so impressed with palaces or temples, with political or religious power and achievements. Instead, Micah anticipated an alternative vision of a different future. He saw an alternative leader who would bring peace and wellbeing to all people, not by any great political ambition, but by attending to the needs of the poor and those closest to the land.

Herod thought he had not much to fear from rabble, So somewhat reassured, he returned to the rich eastern intellectuals to share with them what he had learned. The Magi heard the news and they set off for Bethlehem, a rural place, unsophisticated, not often noticed, and unpretentious. But the House of Bread just might be the perfect place for the birth of the one who would be an alternative “to the arrogant learning of intellectuals and the arrogant power urban rulers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

III

This choice between the two cities and the two visions remains. “Will we be a part of the Jerusalem narrative—where we expect to find a king who will rule the nations, control the wealth of the world and smite our enemies? Or will we find our king a few miles away...in Bethlehem, present with the least, united with the suffering, on the run with refugees?”^{iv}

Where do we look when we are looking for God among us? When the Divine appears among us do we really merely want a return to what we might call normal, and what works for us and our kind? After all that we have learned about “Me, too”? After what happened at Charlottesville, Virginia? After the Windsor Supreme Court decision? After all of that, go back to what we thought was normal? Or do we hunger for a real change, a true alternative, where everyone has what they need, where everyone is included? Tough questions, these.

The marvel before us this morning lies in the response of the Magi. They could have turned up their noses at Micah’s alternative. Instead, they bid farewell to Herod and the capitol and the Temple to head down the dusty road to the village of Bethlehem. They didn’t hesitate, nor resist. Presented with an alternative vision, they reconfigured their wealth, reordered their learning, and reoriented their lives and their hearts around a baby in the stable of an inn who had no credentials.

Nine miles. That’s how far they missed their mark. After looking so attentively, waiting for so long, and traveling so far, it’s hard to imagine anyone who is really wise turning up their noses in pride at a new and alternative vision.

Just nine miles to finish the journey. But, O, what a different way home. Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to Walter Brueggeman’s commentary, “Off by Nine Miles: Isaiah 60:1-7 and Matthew 2:1-12,” in *The Christian Century*, December 19th, 2001; and cited by Timothy W. Ross in “Nine Miles From Bethlehem,” a blog post of The Ekklesia Project, January 3rd, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Brueggeman.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ross.