

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
Rev. Bob Undercuffler

January 4, 2015
Newark, Delaware

Psalms 72:1-15

Matthew 2:1-12

“Going By Another Road”

I remember Christmas pageants. Sometimes in the sanctuary. Sometimes in a fellowship hall. The kings/or wise men/or magi – whatever they are called, are especially memorable. Whether bathrobes with crowns of aluminum foil or stunning robes with jewel bedecked crowns. As they step forward, each sings a verse of “We Three Kings”—first one, then the second, and then the third. And each time, the congregation joins in the refrain: “O, star of wonder, star of night . . . **guide us to thy perfect light.**” The entrance of those three kings, in those Christmas celebrations over the years was thrilling.

That’s what has happened in today’s scripture reading. The Kings/the wise men/whatever you want to call them, have made their entrance and have found the place where the baby and his mother are living.

But today’s story makes clear that the kings arrived at Jesus’ side later—after angels and shepherds had visited. Days later. Some think as long as two years later. In other words, the kings—or magi weren’t actually there on that first Christmas Eve night, like all of our pageants have led us to believe. Actually, at that time the kings were only preparing to make their journey. Packing. Saying good bye to their kids/kissing their wives. However, over the years their parts have been written into the script for Christmas Eve. And yes, other parts have been written out, also.

Think back to your Christmas pageant experiences. Have you noticed, for example, that Herod is never a part of the Christmas pageant? I don’t think any of us would want Herod’s part written into those pageants. It’s dissonant. Too jarring.

For a moment, as we watch those pageants, we can forget that danger lurked all around that scene. King Herod and his power and the threat he poses are easily skimmed-over. When the kings

arrive in those pageants, there is no sense of the peril that surrounded their journey. But on that night, and during the days and months that followed, there was danger everywhere surrounding the birth and life of the Christ child.

Today's text from Matthew offers an exceptional opportunity to rescue the magi from their traditional places in the annual Christmas pageant and restore them to their proper biblical roles:

They were key witnesses to both the threat and promise of the Christ child:

the threat and the promise that comes with God entering into the world,

the threat and the promise that comes with the light of Christ being shined into all corners...even the darkest corners.

The wise men, believed to be astrologers, knew something important was happening. They read the stars in the heavens, and they tried to figure-out the meaning of present and future events by reading those stars. These magi were from somewhere in Persia or present-day Iraq. They determined a significant baby had been born, and they wanted to find him.

And so they went to Jerusalem first, to King Herod. They must have thought Herod knew about the baby, and so they went to ask where this baby was. Or maybe they simply thought it was important to check-in with the man in power in that region before they went off on their own. No matter what the reason, they sought out King Herod. It appears that Herod was completely baffled by their question.

But after they go on their way, we realize that their questions and search alarmed Herod. Just the mention of another king frightened Herod. He is terrified because he is threatened: his power, his status, his empire, his wealth. And so because he feels threatened, he begins to tighten the screws, to send out the search parties, to exert more pressure to assure he maintains control. Desperate, he orders all male children under the age of two to be killed.

The persistent march of light into this world has always been accompanied by fear and threat and resistance. That story has been repeated over and over and over again. We get a brief respite as we watch our annual pageants—respite from having to acknowledge the many things that diminish the light. We can watch

on Christmas Eve and for a moment we don't have to deal with the danger in the world, and we can forget our own complicity with darkness and how we struggle with that. The birth of light into our world is a hard labor, always filled with threat and resistance.

We are, after all, a little like Herod. We know fear when we are threatened. We fear losing the love of our children/or grandchildren when they make different life-choices than what we have in mind for them. We fear loss of position when someone new comes into the workplace, or into our church space. We fear all sorts of situations in which we might lose love or wealth or power.

We're not so different from Herod. Some of us know the fear that comes when we start seeking, when we begin looking for the Christ child, when we begin to follow our own internal tug that makes us want to pay homage to him in ways we would never have imagined before. We know what it is to be fearful and threatened.

We know the same fear and threat exists across our nation and around the world. Jerusalem and Bethlehem are just nine miles apart yet still, today, there are so many barriers between the two places—a wall, checkpoints, tremendous disparity in wealth and opportunity, political strife and fear and threats from all sides. And it is so sad.

It is difficult to avoid thinking about the unease we can feel at Christmastide when all we want to experience is the promise of the Christ child and the peace of the manger scene, and yet we know that there is still threat and danger and darkness that exist all around.

The Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, longtime chaplain of Harvard Divinity School in his book *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* has written a chapter titled "The Gospel and Hope." He tells a story about the South African author Alan Paton, who is best known for his novel entitled *Cry, the Beloved Country*. It is a novel about apartheid in South Africa. Paton came to speak in the United States and Gomes recalls one of his lectures.

There was a question-and-answer period afterwards, and at one point a woman stood up and asked, "Given all that you have said, are you optimistic about the future of your beloved country?" According to Dr. Gomes, Paton paused and scowled and then responded, "**Madam, I am not optimistic, but I remain hopeful.**"

Gomes muses about that answer: "I am not optimistic, but I remain hopeful." So he writes about the difference between sugarcoated blind optimism and hope. Voltaire, he notes, said optimism was "the madness of maintaining that everything is right when it is wrong."

Hope is something different. Hope is knowing that God is working on a grander scale than we can see. And maybe that's where we get confused at Christmastime, because we want to enjoy and be thrilled by the promise of the Christ child's arrival but yet we want to ignore the threats that continue to surround the presence of light. Gomes continues his exploration of the difference between optimism and hope and quotes a preacher who said: "Christianity did not come into the world with a fixed silly grin on its face and a bland 'Cheerio, old chap' on its lips. At its center was a cross."

So I've been thinking about those wise men, and what captures me so about their entrance into our Christmas pageants. **I've decided it's that they give me hope.** They make their way to the Christ child, and the sight of it takes my breath away.

They give me hope because they remind me that people are still seeking the light of Christ and diligently searching and journeying toward that light.

They give me hope because they are outsiders; they are not the least bit like the people who Matthew would have been telling the story to. (Women and men who stood firmly within the Jewish way)

They give me hope because their kneeling at Jesus' side would have set off fear and threat to those early hearers of this story, because these men are strange and foreign.

They give me hope, for when I see them make their way, I'm reminded that God seeks out people, and calls, and uses people who surprise us still.

That's who our God is. That's how God works, and I am thankful.

Those who are wise, when they arrive, pay homage to the Christ child, and then they decide to ignore what Herod told them to do, which was to report-back about where that child was. Rather, they go back home a different way. They remind me that there are people who are still speaking truth to power. Who aren't content

with things as they are. Who value renewal. Transformation. New life. Christ's way of peace, with justice and love.

The wise follow the light of the star; they follow the light that keeps leading them to the "perfect light"; **and they offer gifts**. I see them kneel and present their gifts in those Christmas pageants, and those gifts remind me that my gifts are to be offered too. So maybe I'm not optimistic, but I am hopeful. So I offer my gifts, willingly, eagerly, and with joy.

And maybe, as I take down the tree, and sweep-up the needles, and put away the lights and wrap again the crèche figures and place them in their appointed boxes, the harsh reality of the struggles and difficulties of the world re-appear, yet I do believe it's true that the kings, the wise really did sing "O Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light." And even if they didn't really sing those words, I know that I can.

And live them, too. Faithfully, let us follow.