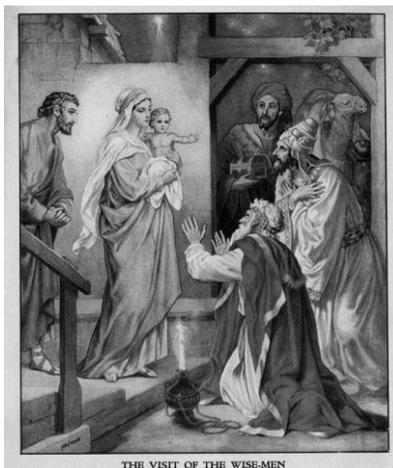


WISE PEOPLE STILL SEEK HIM



Scripture:

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶"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."

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Did you hear in our first reading, that Isaiah predicted the visit by the Magi to the child in the manger? He even predicted gold and frankincense

as the gifts brought to praise the Lord. But no star is specifically predicted.

He mentions a light out of the darkness, and that kings and camels shall come to the bright light. Yet, there is no real scientific proof that there was a star. Some believe it was a comet or three planets in alignment causing the bright light in the sky.

A STAR, A COMET OR A MIRACLE?

In an article on Space.com titled: ‘*Was the Star of Bethlehem a star, a comet, or a miracle?*’ the author, Joe Rao, says, “Whether anyone actually observed them, and if any of these stars sent the Magi on their historic journey, all of it is a matter of conjecture.”

But then he asks, “Was the Star of Bethlehem supernatural, a miracle star?”

Then Rao tells the story of Astronomer Hubert Bernhard, who for many years was a lecturer at San Francisco’s Morrison Planetarium. He created a presentation on the Star of Bethlehem. Near the end of his lecture Bernhard always said: “If you accept the story told in the Bible as the truth, then the Christmas Star could not have been a natural apparition. Its movement in the sky and its ability to stand above and mark a single building; these factors would indicate that it was not a normal phenomenon, but a supernatural sign. One given from on high and one that science will never be able to explain.”

Isn’t that true of the whole Biblical story of Christ’s birth with the Angel Gabriel, Mary the virgin giving birth, the visit to cousin Elizabeth, Joseph’s dream, the escape from Herod to Egypt? All of it seems supernatural and science will never be able to explain most of the components of the birth story.

So what are we to get out of this story? Why in the world has this child’s birth had such a huge impact on our whole earth when the birth can only be explained as supernatural?

STRUGGLING WITH YOUR FAITH

After Christmas, while in Southern California, I had a discussion with my firstborn. He currently isn’t going to church regularly but something is tugging at his soul.

Ryan is analyzing the supernatural part of the Bible. He is concerned that the Bible is all manmade with ulterior motives and not divinely inspired. It was clear he is re-evaluating his faith right now.

You might be surprised to know that I am glad about this, because it is good to struggle with your faith. Lukewarm or routine faith is closer to no faith. But inquiring faith is a growing, developing faith.

PONDERING THE TRUTH

When your heart is pondering the truth of the Bible your mind is putting energy into thinking about God. And that always pleases God when we are trying to find the truth and trying to get to know God better.

When our faith is challenged we honor God by taking on the challenge and reading the Bible, getting into Bible studies, and talking with A pastor or one another or a spiritual leader or coach like Judy who preached last week.

Ryan texted that he discovered the Wycliffe Bible and wondered if I had that translation. Work out the questions in your mind with another. We are made for community and not to try to figure these things out alone. When you are wise, you keep seeking the truth. You don’t just say, “Okay, God is finished teaching me. I know all and see all and understand it all. I don’t need to keep learning or seeking or praying. I’ve got the mystery of faith in God all figured out.” No, faith in God and our spiritual journey with Christ is an ongoing adventure.

I must admit, it was challenging talking or rather debating at times with my son about why I believe in Jesus. But it was good for my soul to discuss these things. Once again he forced me to ponder what and why I still believe in Jesus today. But I told him my faith and understanding about God is different than it was just five years ago. My faith has expanded.

I explained that now I have come to understand that God’s greater message weaves like a golden cord in a rug all through the Bible within the stories and historical narratives. Even if some of the minute details are clearly influenced by culture and context, the golden cord message comes through in the end when you step back in faith and try to figure out

what God was teaching or what Jesus was showing us in that event, or story that has been told over and over again for thousands of years.

The big golden cord message in the birth story is a message of hope, peace, joy, and love that our Advent candles represent. But the other great message in God coming to earth in the flesh is a message of seeking a loving relationship with each one of us. The idea that God wants so badly to be in relationship with us individually and desires for us to feel reconciled with God no matter how sinful we are is hard to grasp but is clearly divine.

God incarnate as Jesus Christ came to earth as a humble child. What meaning underlies the birth of the child story? And why does the whole world still join in the celebration of the child's arrival over two-thousand years later?

JOHN PHILIP NEWELL

It was a year ago next week that John Philip Newell visited us from Scotland. Before he came to us, Dr. Newell was asked to preach for Christmas on a radio show in Chicago called Day One. This is part of his message on Christ's birth and why we should still be seeking "the child."

Newell says, "Throughout the world we celebrate the birth of the child of peace. People all around the world mark his birth with gift giving and celebration. People in cultures everywhere hear again the song of hope and will look to the child. Unwashed herders of livestock, living in fields on the margins, far from the power centers of respectability and prestige, shepherds were the first to look. They heard an army of angels proclaiming: "glory to God in the highest and on earth peace."

Newell goes on to say, "The Shepherds were faithful to what they heard. This is a feature of the Christmas story and a vital feature of Christianity even though we have often failed to believe it, that new vision is born not necessarily among the holders of power. The message of hope emerges among the least significant. Among those that could never have imagined they would be forever remembered in human history."

What is the message of hope today that we are to bear to the world and for one another? Each of us has a role to play in the story of Peace on Earth. That is the song that we are to carry within us to those around us.

In Matthew's gospel story of the birth of Christ, it is not shepherds who come looking to the child, it

is wise men or kings. They were international wise travelers who studied the stars. Although they come from other cultures and nations, Mary and Joseph make it clear to them that all are welcome when they come in peace and look to the child.

John Philip said that when they brought gifts, the gold highlighted the preciousness of the child; frankincense signified the sacredness of the child, and myrrh was a curative ointment that pointed to the healing gifts of the child. Preciousness, sacredness and healing: this is what the Magi gave and it is this practice or this message we are invited to share and participate in today.

We still bow to the child that was born two-thousand years ago. We don't have to just look back to the past but we are to look in our midst in the present, right now, in our family and in every family, on the streets, and in our churches. Newell said, "The child lives deep within us waiting to be born anew."

So, the question is not if we can still seek and find the child but will we still bow and submit ourselves to the sacredness, preciousness and healing powers of the child as the Magi did so well.

**The child is as close to us
as our very souls.
How will we serve the child
with our lives?
What was it in Jesus that we ourselves
bear with us for the benefit of our world?
In remembering the Christ child
we remember how we are related
to all the children in the universe.
We are all inter-related.
We are all born of God.**

WHAT GIFT OR TALENT CAN YOU SHARE?

In 2016, as we look to the child today, imagine you are one of the Magi who brought a gift to the Christ child. What gift or talent do you have that you can bring to Jesus this year? What have you been blessed with that you can share with this church to help us keep the light of Christ shining in this part of Santa Rosa and beyond?

Take a few moments now and write down on the paper enclosed in your bulletin how you will honor the Christ child in your lives this year. How

will you honor the preciousness, the sacredness, and the healing peacefulness of God in your life during 2016?

I will conclude with the final words from Dr. John Philip Newell who says, Let us turn our belief in Christ into action and heal the world together. Let us loudly sing the song of hope. Let us look for the preciousness of the child in every nation. Seek the child's sacredness in every religion. And be faithful to the healing gifts of the child in every family.

Only the power of love will save us. Not the love of power. Only Love Force will create peace on earth, not brute force. The Love Force of God is our Soul force.

The child of peace can be born again. We carry within us the precious gold of life; we carry within us the sacred fragrance of God; we carry within us the healing salve of Love. Let us live it together. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace."

Benediction: I admire the art and writing of Jan Richardson. As we enter into 2016 let us think of:

THE YEAR AS A HOUSE: A BLESSING

Think of the year as a house: door flung wide in welcome, threshold swept and waiting, a graced spaciousness opening and offering itself to you.

Let it be blessed in every room. Let it be hallowed in every corner.

Let every nook be a refuge and every object set to holy use.

Let it be here that safety will rest.

Let it be here that health will make its home.

Let it be here that peace will show its face.

Let it be here that love will find its way. Here -- let the weary come, let the aching come, let the lost come.

let the sorrowing come.

Here -- let them find their rest and let them find their soothing

and let them find their place and let them find their delight.

And may it be -- in this house of a year.

So as you go forth, ponder how it might be to imagine this year as a house, a space in time that is opening itself to you.

How will you enter it with mindfulness and intention?

What rooms do you want to inhabit in this house-of-a-year?

To whom will you offer a welcome?

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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January 10, 2016**