

HOW MANY KINGS???? Epiphany Sunday 2008
January 6, 2008 at Leaside United Church
Rev. John G. Smith

Classic Opening scenes: Jesus Christ Superstar



Bus pulls up in the middle of the desert and the cast jumps out and the show begins.

Matthew's Gospel has a number of opening scenes:
the credits are first (the "begats")
then the dream scene with Joseph and the angel telling him to go ahead and have a baby, (the title scene)
but the action of the movie does not really start until you get to chapter 2.

Matthew's gospel is a marvel of writing.
It craftily moves from one world to another, seamlessly shifting the focus from Jewish religion, to Gentiles, to the Romans, and then back to Jesus, who somehow walks through all three worlds.

The message is clear: Jesus is King, Ruler of all These Worlds.
It's a pretty large claim to make!!!

And so, in the opening act of the gospel, who comes to see him first?
Three kings! From a Far!



We know the kings story very well, as they are the most sought after spots in any Christmas play. Who wouldn't want to be king (or queen)? Who wouldn't want to dress in fancy finery and have power and influence and riches and servants and?

But the kings are not kings. They are magi, which means literally "magicians" (Greek = "magoi") or sorcerers, or astrologers. In our day, they would be psychics, and we would give them little credence. It's like reading your horoscope for the year to come. Did you do that last week? I noted that Jupiter was moving through the zodiac this year, so in every single sign, it said that you would have a personally powerful year, that all things would go your way, and that you would achieve things you never dreamed of. I wondered at the audacity of saying that to people in all 12 signs of the zodiac. And while I certainly hoped it would be true for me, I doubt very much that it will be true for all.

Please note: there is no mention of three kings, only three gifts! I suspect there was quite an entourage with this travelling group. What about their servants and stable boys? Early on in the church's history, they became known by name: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. These initials CMB, also form the anagram for a traditional Epiphany blessing Christ, Bless this house (Christus mansionem benedictus) something which early Christians used to mark on their front doors or porches to ring in the new year.

20 + CMB + 08

Perhaps they really had been following a celestial sign too; there's no reason to debunk this part of the story. Here is a picture of the sky over Arizona on December 24, 2007, showing Mars and Venus lining up in the sky.



Matthew's point is not to discredit the astrologers, as ours might be, but rather to celebrate their arrival, because what it really means when the magi arrive is this:

***the world has arrived at Jesus' door,
the whole world is bowing to Jesus, who is the greatest ruler of all,
and whose reign supercedes even the most powerful rulers of the day.***



Note that Herod never visits Jesus.
Note that the Jewish religious leaders never visit Jesus.
Only the Gentiles, the leaders of other nations, see him for who he is, the Light of the World.
No one within the ordinary realms of Jesus' life could see it.
Only those from afar could really see.

Ah, and don't forget, this is the opening act!
As the curtain unfolds on this extra-special play, the world comes to Jesus and bows in worship.

Ever thought about what happens next?

They leave their gifts with a stunned Mary and Joseph, who, note, say absolutely nothing, then what?

Like George and Elaine in a Seinfeld episode, do they turn to each other, as if nothing has happened, and say: so, care for coffee?

No, they go home a different way.



Seeing Jesus, and acknowledging him as ruler above all, makes a difference to them.

Their life is different, it will never be the same:

they don't become Jews, they don't change their religion,
but they go home a different way.
In other words: their lives are forever changed.

A quote from TS Eliot's poem, Journey of a Magi

***“Were we led all that way for Birth or for death?
There was a birth, certainly we had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and dearth, but had thought they were different;
this birth was hard and bitter agony for us,
like death, our death,
we returned to our places, these kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods.”***

we returned to our places, these old kingdoms,
but no longer at ease here.
utterly and totally changed.
nothing hence forth will ever be the same.

Do you ever feel that way?

Would it be easier if I said to you: this Jesus, he makes no difference really, to our world or to our lives.

So just go home and live the same old way.

Don't bother trying to make room for him in your heart.

Let your heart be ruled by some other ruler, like anxiety, or like fear, or like the need to succeed or the need for approval.

Let these things continue to rule in your hearts,

because Jesus, coming as he did to humanity, in the way he came, and in the form he appeared, really doesn't have anything to do with you at all.

Oh, it **would** make life so much easier!

To just get back on that school bus when the play is over, and become the person you were at the start.

Life goes on!

Who really wants to be transformed???



Who among us wants to give up our power?
Our need for control?
Our heart?

What the Magi teach us is that when we come close to seeing the interplay between heaven and earth (which NT Wright describes as the Third Option for understanding Jesus) we see in Jesus, not just God, but we see in Jesus the IMAGE of God. We then remember that we too are created in the image of God, and so, God is reflected back to us.

We become like what we worship, Thomas Moore says.

When we worship God, our hearts and minds expand with the impossibility of it all, that in Jesus we see both human and divine, and in return, we see the image of the divine in ourselves.

It encourages us to live our lives large.

Think about the opposite:

when we worship something else, say, money, or the bottom line, or profit, or success or things,

we shrink.

We actually shrink;

our hearts and souls become tired and thirsty, because these things don't fill us, they leave us empty.

The price of idolatry is that we become LESS human, not more.



And as Moore reflects:

our souls have an absolute, unforgiving need for enchantment.

This is why the magi make such sense to me.

They are enchanted ones, searching souls, hungry and thirsty for God.

Alchemists of the heart and spirit.

They have gone all over the known world in search of perfect peace and contentment.

They've seen it all, done it all, tried everything else,

but it isn't until they reach the stable door and find their RULER,

that they can finally lay down their gifts, their burdens, their journey.

and finally be able to go home.

How many kings are there in the story so far?

There are 2.

Herod is one, he represents the old order, the religious and political enmeshment that still survives today.

Following this King leads to the road we all know so well:

the road of violence, war, more destruction, the killing of innocent people, the diminishment of the soul of the world,

the deepening of the level of poverty in the world,

an increase in tribalism and ethnic rivalry,

a dissociation from the common good, in the quest for personal aggrandizement.

We learn all of this in the first act of Matthew's gospel.

We learn that the way for US is to follow only one Ruler, the ruler of our hearts, the one whose spirit still lives in our souls, the one who shows us that heaven and earth DO meet at times, and when they do, life is beautiful and good and leads us to appreciate the revelation of God in all cultures in all times and in all places, as something only God can do, and which, if we stand back, is something that can only amaze us and fill us with awe.

Following this King, this ruler, will change not only our hearts, but lead us down the road that is a little less travelled, but which is the only way we can go at this juncture in history:



It is the road of peace-making, war-stopping,
the road where total world-wide health and education dollars outstrip spending on defense and force,
the world in which innocent people are fed and housed, healed and embraced,
a road that leads us to the EXPANSION of all that is human, not diminishment,

the eradication of poverty,

the dutiful care for the environment,

and a true and intentional association with the common good, putting the needs of others first, and ourselves last.

I know we sometimes wonder if being faithful makes any difference at all.
If we get to the end of another year, and have not done any of these things,
then I too will give up.

But if we start this year, having come to know who Jesus really is,
and if not, to seek to LEARN who Jesus really is,
and then live our lives
having chosen to go home a different way,
then I guarantee
we will change.

We will not be the same people we are today.

Who would want to be?

We will not live in the same world in which we live today.

Do we really want things to stay the way they are???

Can we, like the MAGI of old,
come to the light, and let go of our power, our control, our anxieties, our fears?
Can we, like they, traverse afar, and let God take us where we need to go?
Can we give away our most cherished gifts, and kneel at the foot of the Christ?



Whatever your answer, this is the first day of the rest of
your life.

Make SURE you go home a different way!