

Christmas II, Year C  
Jeremiah 31: 7-14  
8:00 only

Jan. 3, 2010  
Psalm 84: 1-8

St. Andrew's Church  
Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-19a

The Rev. Susan Russell  
Matthew 2: 1-12

Blessings on this last Sunday of Christmas. And all best wishes for a healthy and happy new year. The Feast of the Epiphany is this week, Wednesday, the feast of the manifestation of Jesus, the Son of God, to the whole world. We will celebrate an early Epiphany with Bob Franke's Epiphany Cantata at the 10 o'clock this morning.

The manifestation of God's Son to the world. The overriding symbol of this revelation of God is light – the coming of the light of Christ into a dark world. The light of hope and of freedom and the light of peace in a world where peace is difficult to come by.

But the symbol of Epiphany we recognize most particularly is the coming of three foreign dignitaries, following a star to Bethlehem, to witness the birth.

We read from the gospel of Matthew today, the only gospel to speak of wise men from the east. Every effort is made in this gospel to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the one foretold in the Hebrew scriptures, the one who fulfills God's promise of hope and new life.

In this book the child is born in a house in Bethlehem. There is no long trip on a donkey, there are no shepherds and no angels. There is only a brief mention of Mary, his mother.

And the magi – astrologers, learned men, curious about the stars. They were probably wealthy judging by the gifts they brought. But it does not say that they were kings. They were seekers. and when God set this bright star in the heavens before them, they were wise enough to follow.

These three had no contact with Jewish tradition, no way of knowing of the Messianic hope. They knew nothing of the promise of God as recorded in the words of the prophets.

They probably did not know that Jeremiah, speaking God's own words, had said, "I will turn the people's mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow." They probably did not know the words of the Psalms where it said, "My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord."

Yet they too had desires and longings. They must have, because they followed. They who were human responded to the call of the divine. God beckoned to them and, not knowing quite what they were doing, they followed.

Matthew wants us to know right off the bat that the discovery of light in the world is open to everyone, even to those who have no particular background to understand it, even to those we might not expect would understand it, even to those who didn't know themselves that they would understand it, even to those who do not know they are looking for it.

This gospel writer breaks down social and cultural barriers right at the foot of the infant Jesus' cradle. People of all lands and languages and all points of view and all backgrounds are led to the light.

But Matthew also makes it clear that God's grace comes before our action. The light comes before any of us discovers it. When we follow the star it is because God calls us.

There is a Quaker proverb that goes like this: "Do not expect more light until you follow what you have." It's a clear, simple thought so typical of the Quakers. "Do not expect more light until you follow what you have."

It's by following the light of Christ, offered by God, that we become enlightened.

Without ever naming it, we all seek the light. We want peace of mind, happiness, a place to belong, the positive feelings that are able to drive out the negative ones, We seek security, hope for the future, for a better future.

The example of the wise men is before us. They were seekers, so the term "wise" does not mean that they knew everything, or had an understanding of everything. They were wise in that they were willing to be open to discovery, willing to follow, to trust, to welcome the work of the Spirit, to be led and enlightened.

The longings of all of us who do not fully know what we are looking for are met in the action of God in Bethlehem. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

There is more to this story. Following the light often takes us through shadows, too, into the ambiguities of life. There is a dark shadow in this story. The Magi trusted King Herod in the beginning. They told him who they were seeking, and, although God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, and the holy family escaped the wrath of the king,

Herod came with his soldiers and killed. Killed children because of his fear of Jesus, hoping to end Jesus' life just as it began. And there was great sorrow and grief brought down upon the peaceful people of Bethlehem.

Whenever mercy and peace come into the world they are met by opposition. Mercy and peace threaten tyranny and greed and self-interest. Always.

There was and is darkness in the world. But now there is also a great light. To find it, to find more of it, we must follow what we have. And what we have is the great gift of God himself in the world, living as one of us.

The light we seek has power over darkness. It is the God who loves us who put the light of a star in the heavens for us to follow. Thanks be to God.

Soli Deo Gloria