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Bethany Presbyterian Church

Psalm 72; Matthew 12:1-12

January 7, 2024 – Epiphany Sunday

***Psalm 72***

***Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king’s son.  
2May he judge your people with righteousness and your poor with justice.  
3May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.  
4May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.***

***5May he live while the sun endures and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.  
6May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.  
7In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.***

***10May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.  
11May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.***

***12For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.  
13He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy.  
14From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.***

***Matthew 2:1-12***

***2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magifrom the east came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east 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 magi 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 in the east, 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.***

For the first time, Ukrainians celebrated Christmas as a national holiday this past December 25th. This was done to further separate themselves and their identity from Russia, which celebrates Christmas on January 7th, using the Julian calendar to date festivals.1 This means that January 6th, the Twelfth Night, the Feast of Epiphany was also celebrated in Ukraine this week. The political rivalries and the reality of living one’s life under a cloud of war lead societies to make changes, even changes to traditions tied to their religious life. To separate religion and politics is possible. To separate one’s life of faith from one’s life in society that includes political decisions, is nearly impossible.

Even back in the 6th century, it was a religious council that chose to separate celebrations of Jesus’ birth, from celebrations of Jesus’ appearing to the gentiles. Once celebrated on the same day, the council was trying to align the solar and lunar calendars that were being used in the provinces of the Roman Empire, that were at the time 13 days apart. The council separated the celebrations. That council decided that it took 12 days after Jesus’ birth for the three magi to get to the place where a star in the sky was leading them – to the place where Jesus lay in the manger. Thus we have Christmas Day, and Epiphany, 13 days apart. Many Orthodox Christians continue to use the Julian calendar. Thus, the significance of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church making their change this year. Living in a political society will always have some effect on the Church as an institution. The change in Ukraine is not the first time the calendar has been used to make a cultural statement.

What do we celebrate on Epiphany, and why is it so important?

The word “epiphany” means manifestation, or revelation. Today we celebrate epiphany by using our Matthew text, telling of the three magi who followed a star that led them to the location of baby Jesus. This was the first manifestation to gentiles, of Jesus’ **humanity**. Epiphany is also often celebrated using scripture that describes Jesus’ baptism, which is the first manifestation of Jesus’ **divinity**.

The word “magi” is the translation of the word for magician, illusionist, fortune teller, or sorcerer. Sometimes this translates to astrologer, or often magi were the ones who interpreted dreams. Magi were seen as those who had the wisdom and knowledge of the gods. In many translations, the three magi were seen as three kings from Arabia or Ethiopia, and Persia and India.

While these kinds of facts often lessen the mystery of events we’d like to see as profoundly and solely spiritual, knowledge of how we got to our current traditions is also a powerful way to see how God’s people have continually engaged with God’s revelations throughout history. Knowing that God acted and the people responded, is a powerful link that has remained between the people of God for all time. Being connected through time can be seen by the example of our two scriptures for today.

The first scripture Craig read today is from Psalm 72. It is a prayer that the reign of God be realized through the reign of the human king. Written more than 950 years before the birth of Christ, this psalm speaks to the tensions between best intentions and baser motivations that had plagued the kings of ancient Israel. They, like leaders of all times were filled with desires to rule with God-like justice and mercy, and hoped to work for peace. But the lure of power and honor was as corrupting then as it is now. Even after King Saul, King David, King Solomon, even down to King Herod, people were hoping for a King as described in this psalm.

Not only would the king thrive, but would also have good judgment. The king should have influence across all the land. At a time when one king did not often bow to another, the psalmist writes:

***11May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.***

One commentator tells us, “The usual reason for a king to bow down to another king is as an acknowledgement of the first king’s power and privilege.  A king bows to another king because he has been defeated or is a vassal.” And yet we then read in the psalm, May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service:

***12FOR he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.  
13He has pity on the weak and the needy and saves the lives of the needy.  
14From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.***

Our commentator reminds us that “the kings bow before him not because of power, or military strength, or wealth. They bow before the king because of his justice ways. Verse 11[…] is the reason the king is honored.”2

This is the kind of king the world was waiting for. This was the kind of king that frightened King Herod, in our text from Matthew. If the baby that had been born in Bethlehem was indeed this new kind of king, then King Herod would soon lose his power and influence. Calling together all of the priests and scribes he discovered where the child would be born, and then called for the Magi in order to discover when the star had first appeared. Then, knowing where and when these things happened, the King sent the Magi on, lying to them by telling them to hurry and go see the child, and return to the King so that the King could then go himself and pay homage to the child.

One of the books that was read aloud with video on Bethany’s facebook page a few years ago, depicts a picture of the King telling the Magi this lie – it’s a very frightening face in the book! The deceit on his face is clear. The book called “Home By Another Way” 3 gets its title from today’s text from Matthew. King Herod did not wish to go and pay homage to another likely king. He was like the kings that the writer of Psalm 72 was praying to be protected *from*.

Juxtaposing Psalm 72 with the text from Matthew reflects the long history of humans seeking leadership they could trust. In ancient times, there were Prophets, then Judges, and then Kings. Today we have leaders of all kinds in many different countries. As our politics order our societies we too are continually searching for a world where the poor and needy and those who have no helper have someone to call on; the weak, the oppressed are all precious in the site of the one whom we seek.

Today we celebrate that that One has come. Christ’s birth was just the beginning. As Christ’s glory was revealed to the three magi, and then to more and more, we can partake of the same hope and wonder that led the magi to follow the star in the first place. Our hope and our promise and our truth is that even more than 2,000 years after these events, God is still shining stars for us to see. As our daily lives fill with news that disappoints and even frightens us, our faith reminds us to look for the star in the night sky. We know that there is light all around us even in the midst of the darkness of the world.

I wonder when in their journey, the Magi realized what they were looking for. Was it when they saw the star first and felt compelled to follow where it led? Maybe it was when they went to the King to discover where in Jerusalem the child was, only to discover the King didn’t know either. Maybe it was only in the moment when they encountered the baby Jesus lying there looking so small and innocent, yet so glorious at the same time. Our text says they were overwhelmed with joy.

We are not waiting anymore. Christ has come. Our call is to live in ways that declare our joy. What might it take to see that star, maybe just around the corner? Maybe in the next blink of your eye. Every day we speak and act and make decisions that affect the lives of those we know and maybe even the lives of strangers. We all have different ideas about how to live out our faith. If you saw a star tonight, would you follow? It would take quite a bit to compel most of us to take such a journey. I think we all have stars to lead us, and sometimes the journey is short but meaningful. Or long and sweet. No matter what roles we play in life – in our families, in our jobs, in our neighborhoods – we always have some way to make a difference for someone else. Where you are a leader, lead with care and justice. Where you are a peer, treat others with generosity of spirit. Where you are a stranger, show love and compassion.

The magi remind us to keep hold of curiosity and wonder; be ready to be amazed; be ready to be overwhelmed by joy. For our Light has come.

Amen.

1<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/25/world/europe/ukraine-russia-christmas-ukrainian-orthodox-church.html>

“Christmas, like so much else in Ukraine these days, is tightly tangled up in the country’s war with Russia. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church has taken the position that the Julian calendar used in the Russian church does not have religious significance, and that holidays should be celebrated according to the calendar by which people live their daily lives. Even before this year’s formal switch, some Ukrainian Orthodox believers, in the first year after Russia’s invasion, had moved Christmas to December.”

2Beth L. Tanner, Professor of Old Testament, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, N.J., contributor to Working Preacher, Psalm 72, January 4, 2024.

3[https://www.facebook.com/bethanysanbruno/videos/223385252745630/?\_\_cft\_\_[0]=AZU11bpg2nH6rwMUzbuALBa2044QIB4gSz0hAQlOtO\_nUxLAPE9tzMipeCluF49LbHKsQlGSH-WUMI2o1fDOKIyqkZJ3xBiZ\_UEUL1xr0Z7RsUuytiIljANGEeKOrO09N7tPrVPZaX9g4f4qgBlno68jh\_pgd0rZPHim82m2uqnf3WABkr0iV98dsifkZm-ZACpPW2g29wszymkTyf39OF5h&\_\_tn\_\_=-UK-R](https://www.facebook.com/bethanysanbruno/videos/223385252745630/?__cft__%5b0%5d=AZU11bpg2nH6rwMUzbuALBa2044QIB4gSz0hAQlOtO_nUxLAPE9tzMipeCluF49LbHKsQlGSH-WUMI2o1fDOKIyqkZJ3xBiZ_UEUL1xr0Z7RsUuytiIljANGEeKOrO09N7tPrVPZaX9g4f4qgBlno68jh_pgd0rZPHim82m2uqnf3WABkr0iV98dsifkZm-ZACpPW2g29wszymkTyf39OF5h&__tn__=-UK-R)

4Clayton, Kimberly L., Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, p.200.