

**Epiphany  
1.7.24  
Grace St. Paul's**

*“Scripture...presents a rich variety of voices, and sometimes one author or text disagrees with the other. It is an ongoing conversation rather than a set of settled doctrines. And it is our privilege to be invited into that conversation, to become ourselves part of the traditioning process, seeking to bring an unfolding understanding of the good into our present reality.”*

*Walter Brueggemann Amen.*

**This past week, I have had a running email conversation with one of our regular live-streaming parishioners. She is one of a group of congregants who never walks into this building. She lives out of state, but she is just as much a member of this church as any of us, because she worships with us online on a regular basis. She is another example of what we dream about for the future of Grace St. Paul's, a church that focuses on interpreting the Gospel for the local context, but simultaneously considers what it means in a national setting, a church that is making a difference in people's lives in Tucson, and also around the country.**

**Our conversation has been about the sermons I did on Christmas Eve night and Christmas Day. On Christmas, I introduced you to Orunmila, the personification of wisdom in the Yoruba religious tradition of West Africa. We compared Orunmila to the Word made**

**flesh in the prologue to the Gospel of John. We noted the similarities of both with Hokmah or Sophia in our Hebrew Biblical tradition. We talked about the parallelisms in all of these stories and what that means to us as Christians. I made the point that our Cosmic Christmas story in the Gospel of John actually seems to link us to the religious traditions in multiple indigenous cultures. On Christmas Eve, I brought up the misguided efforts of Western Christian missionaries across the centuries up until today. I proposed that the disastrous results of those encounters occurred because of us discounting the theological ramifications of the Christmas story in Luke.**

**Either of those sermons would have been heard as heretical in a majority of Christian churches today. That is because they both fly in the face of what is still considered the classic theology of Western Christianity. That doctrine insists that Christianity provides the only path to salvation and, as such, it is our duty as Christians to bring every human being on the planet to our understanding of faith. To be honest, I was kind of shocked that I did not get more lash back from this. I was actually grateful therefore, when and our out-of-state parishioner wanted to discuss this apparent contradiction. She**

**pointed out the obvious disparity between what I said and what appears right there in the Bible. Doesn't the Gospel of John clearly state that "no one comes to the Father except through Jesus" and that God gave the world Jesus "so that whoever *believes in him* shall not perish?" How could what I said be accurate when the Gospel of John is so clear about this? And if that is the case, how could anyone who did not profess Jesus as their Lord and Savior possibly be saved?**

**Ah, the perils of Biblical context. As black and white as the statements in John 3:16 and 14:6 seem to be, there is one major issue with hearing them as proclamations of the exclusive nature of Christianity. That issue is John's Christmas story. Who is Jesus in the Gospel of John? Well, he explains that in exquisite prose in the prologue to the Gospel, which is our text for Christmas day. Before he says one word about the human being Jesus who walked the earth, he tells us who he is talking about. The word made flesh, Jesus, is the one who was with God at the beginning of Creation, he explains, the one we have come to call the Cosmic Christ. And if that is who Jesus is, the essence that was with God at the beginning of Creation, then isn't Jesus just another name for Sophia, who is described the same**

**way in Proverbs, or for that matter, Orunmila in African tradition or any number or wisdom characters reported as being with God at the beginning of time in a dozen more traditions? If that is who John is referring to in 3:16 or 14:6, and how can it not be, then I assert that all religious traditions with a wisdom figure already know Jesus, already know the Cosmic Christ.**

**Our online parishioner who brought all of this up is in very good company. That is because it is this same Biblical context issue that is faced by the Magi in today's Christmas narrative in the Gospel of Matthew. The wise guys from the East have done their own Biblical study, centering on this morning's first reading, Isaiah 60. "Ah ha," they say, "we have discovered the prophecy of a new king who will change the world." Like John 3:16 and 14:6, the message seems very black and white. It describes a hey day when the sufferings of the people of Jerusalem will end and that city will become a new economic power. Nations from all over the world will come there so that they too can be a part of the financial windfall. The Magi obviously want to be a part of this too, so they follow the instructions in Third Isaiah. They water their camels, they pack their frankincense**

**and their gold, just as the text tells them to do, and they head off to present these treasures to the Jerusalem king. But when they arrive, they discover no new powerful kingdom at all. The problem is that the Magi have not read the entire story. They have not read the prologue to Isaiah 60, so to speak. Isaiah 60 is not about a new Messiah coming to save the world. This prophecy envisions a new Jerusalem all right, but not God's hope for a new Jerusalem. It describes a human understanding of power that has nothing to do with God's vision. They have misappropriated the Isaiah reading because its vision of power is their vision of power. That becomes obvious to them when they meet the frightened king there named Herod. He is unquestionably not the enlightened soul for whom they were searching.**

**It is only then that they return to their Bibles and discover a text they had not considered. It is the words of another prophet with a much different understanding of God's power. It is a voice crying out to the people who have no power, the ones who have been left out of the economic picture by human kings and rulers. This prophet named Micah speaks of a servant leader who will be part of the working class**

**and represent all those who have been stomped on by the power structure. Who is this leader and from where will he come? “But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” O my goodness. There it is again, the wisdom leader of old. It is the Christ...and he is coming not to Jerusalem, but to Bethlehem.**

**And that is why the gifts the Magi bring to a baby born in a barn are so totally inappropriate. They are expecting an Isaiah king and what they get is a Micah king. They read the Biblical prophecy in their context, not God’s. But to their credit, they discovered their misappropriation and discovered the truth by reading their Bibles from a wider angle.**

**So here is my question. Now that we know that Isaiah 60 was the wrong text, now that we know that it took the Magi to the wrong place, why do we continue to use it as our Hebrew Bible reading every Epiphany? Why did we not read to you the Micah text? Why did we not point you to the servant God discovered in a podunk backwoods instead of to a power hungry king in a supposedly new Jerusalem? Why do we continue the same Biblical misappropriation? I would**

**suggest that it is for the same reason that we present John 3:16 and 14:6 to you without giving you the prologue first that explains what they mean. We continue to view our Biblical texts through macro filters, looking just at the individual pericope, instead of through a wide angle lens.**

**Unfortunately, the misappropriations of this beautiful Epiphany Gospel do not end there. For example, no one ever does the Epiphany story without singing the Processional we just did, We Three Kings. What Three Kings? How did the Magi become kings? That is because we have taken another Hebrew text, Psalm 72, and applied it to the wise guys. We took the Psalms language about Arabian kings and assumed it referred to these three guys, because the words sound very much like Isaiah 60. But the Psalm of course is about kings in the time of Solomon. Sigh.**

**These macro views are almost as dangerous as the ones in the Gospel of John. By making the same initial mistake as the Magis do, and never correcting it over the last 2000 years, our eyes have been averted from the real Jesus. It suggests to us that the prophecy in Isaiah 60 really is a vision of God. That power over optic of God**

**replaced the vulnerable God found in a manger. It allowed us to create the church triumphal, the church that reflects the authoritarian vision of Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72. It is what allowed us to be swallowed up by the Roman empire under Constantine and become the church of prosperity and prestige. It is what justified the church of the Middle Ages to become the largest landowner in Europe, whose power exceeded every king and country across the continent. It is what allowed the President of a contemporary country to misappropriate another Biblical text and use it as a description of the exceptionalism of the United States, referring to us as the “shining city on a hill.” By continuing to foster the initial Biblical error of the Magi, we made it possible to jettison the vulnerable church in favor of a power over one.**

**This is the great lesson of Epiphany. The Magi corrected their Biblical error and so must we. Our Christmas and Epiphany stories are meant to move us away from a human understanding of kingship to God’s view of it. Epiphany is a call to envision the real Jesus, who embraces the oppressed. It is a call to obliterate the church triumphal once and for all. It is a call to restore the servant church, the church of Micah, the church of Bethlehem, the church whose leader is unlike**



**any king the world has ever known. And the only way we can accomplish that is to toss out our macro lens for reading the Bible and replace it with a wide angle one.**

**How do we achieve this? The Magi teach us much on that front also. We call them “wise men” with good reason. Magi, of course, is where we get the word magician. We are not talking about David Copperfields though. There was nothing pejorative about the title Magi in the first century. A magi was a highly educated individual who was trained in astrology and dream interpretation. These were the hard sciences of the day, producing the most literate people in society. They use all of that education to both interpret the Biblical text as well as follow the science of cosmology to locate the king who was actually a baby.**

**The story of Epiphany teaches that the way God is made manifest to us is through our use of all of the tools at our disposal, science, technology, and education. We have spent centuries separating fields of study into different spheres. But the story of Epiphany makes it clear that science and religion are intimately**

**connected. If we are going to have our own Epiphanies, we need to not only utilize our religious brains, but our scientific ones.**

**Finally, let us remember who the Magi are and who they represent. They are Gentiles. They are non-believers. They are foreigners. Jesus may be the incarnation of the God of Israel, but the fact that he is made manifest to three guys from present day Iraq makes it clear that this is not a God for a chosen people. This is a servant leader for all nations, a God who represents all people and all of God's Creation.**

**It is also telling that Jews were forbidden to use any form of divination. Magi therefore, were not just foreigners, but folks who were complete anathema to the people of Israel. What does it say to us that the most important revelation in our faith tradition was experienced by three atheistic scientists, by people rejected in Jewish tradition?**

**The Epiphany story is everything we need in our broken world right now. By revealing the God of vulnerability, the God who does not participate in the economic structure of a power over society, there is hope for the oppressed across the world. By teaching us that we are**

**not the church of Isaiah 60, but rather of Micah 5, we are being given the opportunity to eradicate the church triumphal that has harmed so many, while rediscovering the servant church of all. By honoring both science and religion, we have the chance to reunite the two elements of society that has caused the greatest segregation of our lifetime. By bringing them back together, we can work as one to find the ultimate truths of the universe and God. By showing us that the God born in Bethlehem is a God of all nations and all people, it holds the potential to end the bitter conflict that continues unabated in the Middle East today and across the globe.**

**So let us begin anew to always view our sacred text through the widest wide angle lens. Let us utilize scientific discoveries to widen that view even more. Then let us reveal to all the world the universalist message of the God who stands with all nations, all people, and all of God's Creation. That is the Epiphany that will bring life to the entire planet. That is the Epiphany that will bring light to a broken world. Amen.**