

***When the Kings Come Marching In***

Robert R. Hann  
Trinity Reformed Church  
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Isaiah 60:1-6, 10-11

Matthew 2:1-12

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*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (Isaiah 60:3)*

O.K., I admit it. Maybe this Christmas someone ought to have covered me with green paint and hung a sign around my neck that said, “The Grinch.”

Each year it seems to me that the church’s Christmas images and songs have been co-opted by the malls and the mood music stations, and each year it seems to begin earlier. It used to begin just after Thanksgiving, but it seemed to me that it happened this year just after Halloween. So, by the beginning of the church’s time of celebration and worship on Christmas Eve, I was ready to punch out the lights of Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. . . to melt down Frosty the Snowman. . . and even to nuke the Little Town of Bethlehem. Was I the only one who felt this way?

And, as it always does, Christmas came and went. We celebrated what we should have celebrated, God’s intervention in our world in the birth of Jesus. We enjoyed time with our families and friends. But now Christmas is behind us. Holiday greetings that were “Merry Christmas” or even “Happy Holidays” became “Happy New Year” about a week later, but those greetings are silent now. The Christmas tree in our church sanctuary is gone, and probably the ones in our homes have been taken down as well.

But our church calendar tells us that the message of Christmas is too important, too big to be contained and celebrated in just one day. It takes twelve days to get the good news of the Christmas gospel through our heads – the twelve days of Christmas.

You probably know that the twelve days of Christmas are not part of the countdown *to* Christmas, with our beloveds expecting a more splendid gift on each of the twelve days. The twelve days of Christmas is the time between Christmas and Epiphany, January sixth, which came this past Friday. It’s the day that Hispanic culture calls “Three Kings Day.” In the wisdom of the church’s calendar we get to celebrate the fullness of Christmas in the quietness after the mood music stations and the malls have moved on to other things!

Our Gospel text is so familiar that we know it by heart. Many of you could have recited it along with me as I read it. Wise men from the east bring gifts and worship to the young Jesus.

Who do they stand for, these mysterious men from the east? Most of the historical enemies of Israel were from the east. Maybe the Magi were from Babylon, the nation of Israel's most infamous captors and oppressors. Maybe they were from Persia, where court astrologers called Magi cast the emperor's horoscope and hailed him as the "King of Kings."

There's a deep irony in our Gospel story: The people from pagan lands, the lands of Israel's oppressors, come and worship Jesus. But the one who has a claim to the title of Judean king – the king of the Jews – wants to kill him.

We call the closing day of the church's Christmas season Epiphany. The Greek word means "appearance," and it carries with it a note of awe and amazement. It's an appearance that we wouldn't have expected.

Now, with the whole of the Old Testament in our minds, we might not have been surprised by angels appearing to the Jewish couple Mary and Joseph. We've seen angels before. And we've read of prophetic visions before, so we would not have been amazed by a vision that came to an old priest in Jerusalem. We might have been ready for these things, because things like these had happened to God's people before.

But Epiphany recalls the appearance of God not just to Jewish people but to the pagans, the Gentiles. The Magi, the men that the church has identified as kings of the Gentile nations, representatives of the nations that had afflicted Israel, coming to worship and to offer gifts—an amazing appearance indeed—nothing like *this* had ever happened before!

And to see how truly amazing all this was, we need to turn to our Old Testament text from Isaiah. Matthew was no doubt thinking of this text as he wrote our Gospel story. In Isaiah's day Israel was still suffering from its experience of conquest and exile by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Assyria had devastated northern Israel in the eighth century B.C. Two centuries later the south had been conquered by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, its leaders taken into exile.

And Isaiah's vision says the kings of Israel's historical enemies will come to Jerusalem not as plunderers but as pilgrims. The nations that were your captors will bring your children home to you and will nurse them on the way. The foreigners who destroyed your city and its temple will exchange their swords for masons' tools and will build them up again. The soldiers who stripped the gold from your altars will bring it back to you. That would be an Epiphany of God and his power that the world had never seen!

Isaiah's prophecy is firmly rooted in the biblical picture of justice. Biblical justice in its most fundamental sense is identifying what's been wrongly taken away and giving it back again, even and perhaps even especially when it has been taken by those who are the most powerful.

Isaiah dreams of the wealth and power of the nations being restored to its rightful purposes – the purposes that were intended by God

We went backward in our Bibles a few hundred pages as we moved from Matthew to Isaiah. Now if we turn forward from Matthew about the same number of pages as we turned backward to read Isaiah, we come upon another Epiphany-like passage. It's from the twenty-first and twenty-second chapters of the Book of Revelation. Reformed Christians don't usually do a lot with Revelation, but it warrants our attention. It's the very last book of the Bible, and it tells us how God's long story with us comes out.

Listen:

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*

*I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.*

*The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.*

Listen:

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

*Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.*

Here's how God's story comes out. Just as Isaiah predicted, the kings of the nations bring their glory into God's city. For *glory* read *symbols of economic and political power* – the things represented in that world by gold, frankincense, and myrrh; the things represented in our world by Political Action Committees, and by fat portfolios, and by executive offices on Wall Street.

And in John's vision the world is no longer fragmented like ours is. There are no longer first, and second, and third world countries. There are no longer people with money to burn and at the same time people without two coins to rub together.

There is a tree in the city, the Tree of Life, just as there was in the Garden of Eden, and we are told that the leaves of the tree are "for the healing of the nations," for healing within nations and healing between nations, for the healing of America, and of Iraq, and of North Korea and Iran.

These passages tell us how to read Matthew's story of the Magi. It's right in the center, between Isaiah's dream of unexpected restoration and Revelation's vision of the fulfillment of all God's promises. In our real, historical time, in a real town called Bethlehem in a year which was just about at the beginning of the time we call A.D., an event takes place, that we call Epiphany – an amazing occurrence.

Jesus comes to us not in an unrealistic ideal paradise as we might have thought if all we'd read were Isaiah and Revelation. Jesus comes in the real world alongside Herod the real king and Augustus the real emperor. In real historical time Jesus, as Israel's Messiah, receives the gifts of the nations on Israel's behalf.

Jesus is not only the one through whom God's purposes are accomplished. Jesus shows us by his concrete example in our real world what the fulfillment of God's purposes looks like.

Now we know from the gospel that Jesus' coming is good news for the poor and powerless. Jesus will tell his disciples later in Matthew, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," blessed are those whose spirits are broken by poverty and rejection.

We know that the Gospel is good news for the poor, but it's in our story of the Magi that we see what good news looks like for the wealthy and the powerful. They lay their symbols of power and wealth at Jesus' feet, and then they worship him.

And then, significantly, our text says, "They left for their own country by another road." Going east by another road doesn't mean that they headed home by Route 104 instead of taking the New York Thruway. Anyone with a smidgen of biblical or rabbinic Hebrew will know that they went home following a different *halachah*, a different *way of life*. Remember how Jesus' disciples were called "followers of The Way." The Magi went home as transformed people, following a transformed way of life, who would henceforth conduct their political and economic affairs differently.

The good news of the gospel for the poor is relief from the burden of poverty. The good news for the Magi and those they represent is relief from the soul-killing burdens of money and privilege.

God's plan for humanity goes farther than what we often think about, the making of saved, born-again individuals. The salvation of individuals is of course part of God's plan for humanity, but God's plan is also for the creation of saved, born-again political and economic systems. It's about transformed uses of what in that world was represented by gold, frankincense and myrrh. In our world it's about renewed politics, and for saved and saving decisions in corporate offices.

God's plan is for stewardship in the largest sense of the word, using what has been given to us as its rightful Owner intended. It's about using one's affluence and influence on behalf of others in the civic and human family, in ways that anticipate the fulfillment of biblical visions of all nations being healed and all wealth and power dedicated to the purposes of God.

We call the day of the Magi Epiphany, appearing, making visible. In the story of the Magi we see what born-again politics and economics looks like in our real world. It's about the release of the captives, and it's about new beginnings for the captors. It's about blessings to those who are poor, and it's about renewal and release to those who are tempted by affluence and corrupted by power. It's about healing within and among all the nations.

The story of the Magi at Bethlehem isn't the end of the story. God's outcome is still hard to see in our world. But by the example of the Magi right in the middle of our world—the real world of Caesars and imperial politics, of Herods and corrupt governments—those who understand the example of the Magi respond to conditions in our real world not with deep despair as though there is no hope, but by acting out God's future in the present, by demonstrating by their actions what real hope looks like.

We know who's on the winning side in the real world, and we can align ourselves with God's victory by the concrete political and economic decisions we make now. We can do this in the middle of this world of portfolios and power, of politics and Political Action Committees, in the place where God has put us as stewards of our affluence and influence and as witnesses to his kingdom.

“O come thou long expected Jesus, come to set thy people free!”

Amen!