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2nd Sunday after Christmas
Year B
University Presbyterian Church
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IN THE BEGINNING, PART TWO

MATTHEW 2:1-12; JOHN 1:1-9

Every gift does not arrive on Christmas Day, and everything that a year brings is not obvious on New Year's Eve. Half the fun is in the guesswork, being comfortable with mystery, being captivated by magic and following the stars by which God guides.

Is there a gift that you forgot to wrap? If so, why not wait until next year (which is actually this year now)? Maybe a gift is lost in the mail. Maybe one is already here, and you or I have not yet stumbled upon it but will...

The church is still celebrating Christmas (and no, this is not a public service announcement informing you that the Christmas committee has met and decreed that Christmas will, in fact, be observed as usual this year). Christmas---that festival first staged in Bethlehem---begins with a promise and ends with the arrival of magi, who are moved, by God's grace, to follow a star that leads them (and us) to the Twelfth Day of Christmas, which the church remembers on Epiphany.

One of the thoughts that occurred to me this New Year's Eve is that every year, by secular standards, begins and ends with Christmas; and with Christmas comes joy, deeply satisfying, ever-sustaining joy, joy that serves as bookends to whatever any given year brings.

For those who journey to Bethlehem, step-by-step, following Scripture's lead, cultural celebrations of Christmas seem like a comedy of errors. Is it just me? Or does everybody have a neighbor who puts a plastic baby Jesus out in the yard beside a plastic Thanksgiving turkey in late November. Then as the turkey is put away, somebody finds the manger, Mary, Joseph, shepherds, magi

and assorted animals (including a crushed armadillo that may or may not be plastic). Now Jesus has a place to sleep, parents to comfort him, someone to mind the zoo and magicians who may pull a rabbit out of a hat; and if this is not enough, this scene is squeezed somewhere in between Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer (whose nose is a light bulb), Frosty the Snowman (inside a bubble with a snow-blower) and the Grinch Who Stole Christmas (one whom Herod, in Matthew's Gospel, aspires to be).

Suffice it to say that the chronology is rushed (to say nothing of the nativity being reduced to a commodity). In truth, this is how the story goes. Mary and Joseph come first. Angels come and go. Then there is Jesus, a little more Jesus and a little more Jesus until there is a screaming Jesus who is less interested in Joseph than he is in mother Mary. Angels come and go again. Then there are shepherds, and just when you think it is time to call it a season, magi arrive (at least in one Gospel).

"Magi" often is translated "wise men," but is unclear how wise they are, and the only evidence that they are, in fact, men is that they do not stop and ask for directions (although we would not stereotype anyone here, now would we?).

One of the functions of the magi in Matthew's Gospel is to universalize the story without sacrificing context. In the first sentence, Matthew says "Bethlehem...Judea...and Jerusalem," and in so doing, affirms that Jesus is the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel. Remember this is how Herod finds him. He gathers chief priests and scribes to find out where the prophets say the Messiah is supposed to be born, and Herod is afraid.

The magi are wise enough to ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Then they confess to having observed "his star at its rising." Obviously, there is more to them than a quiet, unassuming guru-like quality. Magi ask tough questions, questions that intimidate world leaders and expose fear, fear that begets violence. What is so intimidating about a question? The truth behind it and/or the consequences of its recognition: What is Hamas doing in Gaza? Why does Israel feel that violence accomplishes anything?

Magi subvert expectations of violence. The disobey Herod when he says, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay homage." Yeah, right...bring him so that Herod's Jewish problem will go away. Obviously, it does not, has not and will not anytime soon, and the problem is not anybody is Jewish, but the fact that there is violence in the world.

Still, the fact that there are magi in Bethlehem suggests that there is more to the story than Jewish prophecy and Middle Eastern politics; and by extension, there is more to the story than Christian dogma or Western imperialism.

This story is about what is written in the stars, a bold proclamation that Jesus Christ is born. The magi are not Jewish or Christian, and at this point in history, it would be impossible to be Muslim. The magi are Persians who dabble in astrology and magic. Nowadays, there would be those who are suspicious of them for knowing their zodiac sign or practicing Wicca (of course, I have noticed that most people who laugh off any discussion of astrology are able to answer me when I ask, "What is your sign?"). Like Bill Henderson and his cat, I am a Leo...

By including magi in his Gospel, Matthew is saying more than "everybody in the Middle East ought to get along" (though that is not a bad place to start). By following the star, the magi's "better late than never" arrival signals that all power in the universe is ultimately and intimately related in the God beyond the gods carved by human hands.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." No, this is not Matthew; this is John. The "him" to which the Gospel writer refers is Jesus Christ, and for John, this Christ is cosmic. This Christ co-exists with God from the beginning of time, pre-dating everything in the Hebrew Scriptures to the historical Jesus, and at last, in the birth of the Messiah, he comes.

John's Gospel is unique among those canonized in the New Testament. John's Gospel, unlike Matthew's, Mark's or Luke's, is more theological than synoptic. It strives to interpret what Jesus does and says as opposed to providing a historical account like the others purport to do.

John searches. He searches for meaning, for light midst darkness and wisdom midst words. Notice that John is the one who exalts Jesus as "the Word": definite article, capital "W." John universalizes the story by situating it in a different context, by translating it in terms of Genesis 1, by insisting that this miracle takes place "in the beginning."

In the beginning was the Word/wisdom/Sophia, and this Word/wisdom/Sophia was not in isolation but with God. God, in this scenario, has always existed in relationship, and this may explain why God calls the faithful to be in relationship with one another throughout the biblical narrative. With this Word/wisdom/Sophia, God creates. God creates community in community, and in community, God equips us to be creative (if not highly functioning).

God creates the earth ex nihilo, and "what has come into being in God was life," not just girls and boys and horses and toads, but also moons and stars and wind and rain. God, forgive us for thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. Forgive us for forgetting to look up, for being afraid to follow a star. Maybe the wise men (and women?) seem wise, because they reflect the brilliance of the star that they follow.

The God that has gathered us to worship here at the beginning of another semester and another year has been here before, because the God that has gathered us to worship is a God of beginnings. Christmas is about beginnings, and yet, it is not the first beginning chronicled in Scripture.

The story told in the prologue to John's Gospel is "In the Beginning, Part Two" (Part One will be the subject of next Sunday's sermon). Thanks be to God that John beholds the mystery of the incarnation without forgetting that God has been here before. The advantage of looking over one's shoulder is remembrance, because in remembering, there is wisdom. The disadvantage of

remembering, however, is the temptation to live in the past, and to do so is to miss the gifts that arrive after Christmas Day that are as valuable as gold, frankincense and myrrh; and perhaps even more tragically, to miss the gifts that God is providing, the gifts that are among us if we would look up and behold the beauty of a star. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.