

Jan6

Walter Bruggemann from

The Christian Century, Dec. 19-26, 2001

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

January 6, 2008

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹ Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, 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 wise men 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 at its rising, 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.

About 600 years before the birth of Christ the Babylonians defeated the Israelites. They destroyed the holy city of Jerusalem and they forcibly resettled the chosen people in Babylon, what we call Iraq, today. That period in history is called “The Babylonian Captivity” and it had a tremendous impact on the people, the scriptures, and on the people’s understanding of their relationship with God. It is surprising that so few Biblically literate people today are familiar with the events of the Babylonian captivity. Many have never heard of it. A lot of the psalms were written about that tragic time. The entire book of Lamentations. (That’s why it’s called *Lamentations*.) A good deal of what the prophets had to say, was said about the captivity of God’s people in the land of Babylon.

Isaiah had some things to say about the situation. We heard it in the first lesson for this morning. We also heard from Matthew in this morning’s Gospel lesson. If we are going to celebrate Epiphany, we must hear Matthew’s story of the wise men. But, Matthew was not the first one to imagine God’s hand guiding rich wise men from the East to Jerusalem. For Isaiah, more than six hundred years before Matthew, these were symbols of God’s people rising above the devastation of the Babylonian exile. In the 60th chapter of Isaiah we find a poem that the prophet spoke to the Jews in Jerusalem about 580 B.C; it is our first lesson this morning. These Jews had been in exile for a couple of generations. The ones who came back had, for the most part, never been in Jerusalem before. They were the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren of the Israelites of old. They had heard two generations worth of stories about how wonderful the old city had been. How glorious the temple was. They had finally come home to a place they had never been before – and their hopes and expectations were boundless.

Then they got there.

Jerusalem was a shell. Deserted rubble. Fifty years of wind, rain, and scavengers had not repaired the destruction of the Babylonians.

The hopes of the Israelites turned into gloom. Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down, and there is no economy, and nobody knows what to do about it?

In the middle of this catastrophe, Isaiah stepped forward. He invited his depressed discouraged contemporaries to look up and to hope and to expect everything to change. He said, "Rise, shine, for your light has come." Isaiah announced that Jerusalem would become alive with productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn..." Caravans loaded with goods would come from Asia and bring prosperity. Celebrate. God had promised to make the city a place of peace – and a promise from God is sure.

Isaiah spoke of kings bringing riches from the east to Jerusalem. The words of Isaiah were recorded and, over six hundred years later, Matthew knew those words. It appears that the wise men knew them, too. The wise men knew they were to go to Jerusalem and to take rare spices, gold, and frankincense and myrrh. Most important, they knew that they would find the new king of all peace and prosperity. Those words of hope had been spoken to desperate people long before – it was the promise of God and it was true.

But when Herod (the current king in Jerusalem) heard the plans he was frightened. A new king would be a threat to the old king and the old order.

Then a strange things happened. In his panic, Herod arranged a consultation with the leading scholars or scripture, and he said to them, "Tell me about Isaiah. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense?"

The scholars answered, "You have the wrong text. And, incidentally, the wise men who just got here – they have the wrong text, too. You are looking back 600 years to those confident words of power and riches from Isaiah. **That text from Isaiah will mislead you, Herod, because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be**

restored as the center of the global economy. You would like to think the urban elites can recover their power and prestige and nothing will really change.”

Herod didn't like the answer the scholars gave him. (Leaders often don't like the answers that scholars give them.) He asked them, “Well, do you have a better text?” The scholars may have been afraid of Herod, but they told him. The *right* text is found in Micah. “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old...”

This is the voice of a different hope for the future. A voice that is not impressed with high towers and great buildings, centers of commerce and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished. This hope will organize the common people of the land in resistance to the overbearing threat. The threat is self-sufficiency. The threat is ignorance of our dependence upon God.

Micah spoke of a leader who would bring peace and prosperity to his people – not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the people we see around us everyday. The kind of people you find in Bethlehem.

Herod told the Eastern intellectuals the truth – and the rest is history. They headed for Bethlehem, a rural place, dusty, unpretentious, unnoticed. It is, however, the proper setting for the birth of the One who will offer an alternative to the arrogant power of urban rulers.

The narrative of Epiphany is the story of these two communities: **Jerusalem** – with its great pretensions, and **Bethlehem** – with its modest promises. We can choose a “return to normalcy” in a triumphalist mode. A life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that has nothing to do with our usual pretensions. We can receive life given for the sake of life.

The wise men did not resist this alternative. They accepted it, seemingly they accepted it with enthusiasm and went to the village. They reorganized their wealth and learning, and

reoriented themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials – except being shined on by a star.

Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem, and a good deal farther than that by any measure of sophistication. The wise men had a long history of scholarship, but they missed their goal by nine miles – and that’s just on the map. It is chilling to think how the story might have gone had Herod’s scholars not remembered the second chapter of Micah – and set the wise men back on the right road.

Our task is to let the weakness of Micah 2 disrupt the self-congratulations of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place. We’re off by about nine miles. We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency. Epiphany is a good time to take the journey. Where are we going? Is the star really leading us to power and self-sufficiency?

We see our country war and we do not see the end of it. We see people lose their jobs. Sometimes our own families can not understand us. The world can seem loveless. Everywhere, there are reminders of the shambles that can come from the pretensions of our abilities to control our surroundings and our authority over our own world.

The way beyond is not about security and prosperity. It is about loving our neighbors. It is about generosity and living at peace with other people. Wanting what is best for them. Showing them the love of God.

The wise men, the outsiders from the East, they made the trip. They were willing to be led by a ruler who had set his seat of authority in among the common and the meek and the peaceable. It would be ironic if the “outsiders” among us were willing to go find God in a new and different place – and we, meanwhile, we who are God’s own people, we resisted. It would be sad if we held out for a show of power.

The wise men, were wise men. They made the nine mile trip to find the plain and common authority of God’s love. And the Gospel tells us they took a very different way home.