

“Follow the Money”

by Mark Davies

Memorial United Methodist Church
White Plains, New York
January 6, 2008

[Lectionary:

New Year's Day - Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Rev. 21:1-6a;
Matthew 25:31-46;

Epiphany – Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12;
Matthew 2:1-12]

Scripture reading: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12, 25:31-46.

For Orthodox Christians, today, January 6th, Epiphany, marks one of the three most important events of the liturgical year, together with Easter and Pentecost, because Epiphany celebrates God's revelation of God's self to humankind through Christ Jesus. In fact, Orthodox Christians call this day not *Epiphany* (that is, “manifestation”) but *Theophany* (“divine manifestation”); and they celebrate not the coming of the magi but the baptism of Christ, when God publicly proclaimed Jesus as God's son.

Here in the West, for 1500 years, we have associated Epiphany with the magi. It's a bit harder to see how a visit by wise men relates to the manifestation of Christ to the world, but it does, in subtle and wonderful ways.

First, however, we need to step back a bit and look at our Isaiah passage. The first part of the book of Isaiah (called First Isaiah) was written after the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BCE and the exile of most of the Israelites. Isaiah prophesied further, even greater destruction, followed by a return from exile and the restoration of the united Kingdom of Israel and Judah under a descendant of King David, to which the entire world would pay homage. But it didn't quite play out that way. The Southern Kingdom of Judah, and even Jerusalem, fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, when the temple itself was destroyed. Less than 60 years later, the Persian King Cyrus conquered Babylon and allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple; but too few Jews returned, the restoration of the temple progressed slowly, and Israel and

Judah rather than reestablishing a kingdom became a humble province of Persia. So Second Isaiah, written at the end of the Babylonian exile and right after, looked not to the restoration of the kingdom but to a future when God alone would rule over all creation in a messianic era of peace among nations and universal recognition of the one God. (See JPS Jewish Study Bible, pp. 780-782, 903) We come then to Isaiah 60:1-6.

This is an Epiphany, a Theophany, when God manifests God's self to the world, when the light of God shines forth throughout the earth, and all people live by God's will, when all those in exile return home and the riches of the nations come to the City of Zion and everyone "shall herald the glories of God." (Isaiah 60:6)

Medieval Christendom developed to a high degree an ancient idea called *figura*, where events are prefigured by previous events. (See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*) Christ became the second Adam, Mary the second Eve. Job's three days in the belly of the great fish prefigured Christ's three days in the tomb. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil that bore the apple bringing about the fall of humankind prefigured the tree upon which Christ died to bring the salvation of the world.

This same idea has been at work for millennia. Our gospel writers created stories reflecting *figura* and the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Thus, as Second Isaiah spoke of a time when nations would come to the light of Zion and visitors from afar, riding on camels, "shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6), in Matthew wise men, traditionally viewed as riding on camels, follow the light of the star to pay homage to the infant Jesus, offering him gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). To fulfill the prophecy of Micah, the author of Matthew has Jesus born in Bethlehem. We cannot know if this story is literally true, but certainly we know it is eternally true.

The magi are not Jews but Gentiles, and not even Gentiles who live among the Jews but visitors from afar, strangers in a strange land. Yet through them the messiah is first revealed, open not merely to the "our kind" but to the entire world. This, too, is an Epiphany.

But an Epiphany of what and to whom?

Let's take those questions in reverse order. To whom is God in Christ revealed? Who understands what Jesus is? Certainly the magi do, as does Herod.

Herod understands what Jesus is about. He understands, and he fears. Almost from the moment of his birth, Jesus is marked for assassination by the political and religious domination systems of his time. Who else understands him? The shepherds. Stinky, dirty, uneducated shepherds understand Jesus. John the Baptizer recognized Jesus, even while both were still in their mothers' wombs, and again at Jesus' baptism. So did the man born blind whose sight Jesus restored (John 9), and the Canaanite woman who sought healing for her daughter tormented by demons (Matthew 15:21-28). Unclean spirits recognized Jesus for who he was (Mark 5:1-20). The scribes, the Pharisees, the Sanhedrin, the lawyers – the religious powers and principalities, collaborators with the Roman oppressors – they understood Jesus only too well, which is why they, like Herod, sought his death.

What about Jesus' friends and neighbors, those he had lived with, grown up with? They did not believe in him and certainly did not understand him. (Mark 6:1-6) And his disciples, his followers? They never quite seem to get it either. They fight over who will sit at his right hand and left when he comes into his kingdom (Mark 10:35-37). Two of his closest disciples, James and John, propose to bring down fire from heaven to kill villagers who do not welcome Jesus (Luke 9:54-55). When Jesus talks about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the disciples think he's talking about bread (Matthew 16:8). Time and again they misunderstand his teachings and exhibit lack of faith (e.g., Matthew 15:15-16), and Jesus must repeatedly rebuke them for their woodenheadedness and faithlessness, at one point shouting in frustration: "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you?" (Luke 9:41) Even Peter, the rock upon which Jesus will build his church (Matthew 16:18), goes so far astray that Jesus calls him Satan, for trying to prevent Jesus from going to his destiny and death in Jerusalem. You really gotta feel for Jesus. Sometimes it's almost comical.

So, who understood Jesus, who recognized him for who he was and what he was? Certainly the prophet (John the Baptizer). Certainly his mother, but then, she was his mother. But otherwise those who recognized Jesus form a curious group: the stranger, the marginalized, the sick, the captive, the collaborators, oppressors, and possessors.

And with which group do we identify ourselves? We like to think of ourselves as disciples of Jesus, which in this context is probably just about right because the disciples didn't get Jesus either. We walk with Jesus, we talk with Jesus, we pray with Jesus, but, speaking for myself, I really don't get it. Not like

the stranger, the marginalized, the sick, the captive, the collaborator, oppressor and the possessor. They get Jesus.

During the Watergate scandal, when the reporters were trying to put the pieces together, Deep Throat purportedly told Bob Woodward to “follow the money.” Maybe if we want to recognize Jesus, really recognize Jesus, who he really is and what he really means, we have to follow the money. Who are the oppressors and why? Whom are they oppressing and why? Follow the money.

Which brings us to our second gospel lesson, and our second question: what was the Epiphany? What was it that was revealed?

For me, Matthew 25 is the scariest passage in the entire Bible. The NIB points out that these are the last words in Jesus’ last discourse. This is it. The finale. The bottom line. Net-net. To quote the NIB: “To the reader’s surprise (ancient and modern), the criterion of judgment is not confession of faith in Christ. Nothing is said of grace, justification, or the forgiveness of sins. What counts is whether one has acted with loving care for needy people. Such deeds are not a matter of ‘extra credit,’ but constitute the decisive criterion of judgment....” (NIB, vol. VIII, p. 455)

We may quibble over this word or that word in the gospels; we may dissect and analyze until our eyes fall out. But this passage is hard core Jesus. We cannot explain it away. Jesus tells us that if we do not feed the hungry, give clean water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger (that is, the alien), clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit the prisoner, and liberate the captive, then we will go to hell. That’s what he says. Do we dare not take him at his word? As the Upper Room writer for Nov.17 put it, "Imagine a world where settling for the status quo is a crime." Well, in the eyes of Jesus it *is* a crime.

We must be careful here. Jesus is not talking about just giving money to the poor. Jesus is not about charity. Jesus is about relationship. Because God is about relationship. That’s why Jesus would not turn stones into bread, even if he could feed the world. Great as that temptation was, bread from stones would not establish relationship. Charity does not establish relationship. Love does.

Scripture teaches us that we are made in God’s image. And what it is that we, as mortals, desire most in all the world? Studies show that it is love. Now we must be careful not to project ourselves onto God, not to make God into our image. But certainly our craving for love reflects our Creator. Indeed, as Jesus teaches,

the entire law and the prophets can be reduced to two commandments: to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Matthew 22:36-40) Or, as Micah puts it, “and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

God, I would suggest, is a lonely God. How can God be otherwise? And thus God must above all else desire love and relationship, including our love and relationship. That’s why we have free will. Love must be freely given, or it is not love.

But sad for us and sadder for God, we simply cannot be in relationship with God unless we are first in relationship with our neighbor, unless we act upon our professed belief in God and enter into relationship with our neighbor. Jesus doesn't give us an A for effort. Jesus gives us an A only for action. Succeed or fail, we must act. So feeding the hungry means eating with them as sisters and brothers, just that we supply the food.

And how do we identify those whom Jesus commands us to feed, clothe, welcome, care for, visit, and liberate? Again, just follow the money. Where the money does not flow, there is where we must look for those whom Jesus has commanded us to tend to.

Amen.

Benediction: Go in peace. Do what is right. Serve God. Amen.