

**Wesley United Methodist Church
January 3, 2021**

Christmas All Year
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Two days after Christmas, I read about a conversation between a pastor and a store owner. The store owner said that after Christmas he is faced with the mad rush to put everything Christmas away and get ready for the next holiday. The pastor responded that his job was different and more difficult because his job was to remind people to keep Christmas alive all year.

That led me to remember my all-time favorite Christmas TV special. Believe it or not, it is “Christmas Eve on Sesame Street”. It’s definitely not a religious story but it does embody many of the attitudes that we profess are important about Christmas. At the end there is a wonderful song called, “Keep Christmas with you all through the year.”

Part of it proclaims, “Christmas is a spirit of giving peace and joy to you, the goodness of loving, the gladness of living, these are Christmas too.” I affirm that completely, because I believe that Christmas, the birth of Jesus is an incarnational event in more ways than one. It is incarnational in the obvious way of God becoming human in Jesus, but as a commentator I read this week said that it is also incarnational in a way that involves the daily experience of ordinary people who are transformed into chosen vessels of God’s purpose and blessing.¹

During the past few weeks, we have seen how God has used the daily experiences of ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna in ways that have transformed them into vessels used by God to bring purpose and blessing to the lives of others. Today, we see this happening in the lives of the Magi, or those we have also called the “Three Wise Men”. They are part of the cast of characters in this important life transforming story.

I believe that we are also important characters in Jesus’ story. We are those who are part of the story today, part of the cast of characters who daily live out all the transforming characteristics that help us live Christmas every day, all year long. Unlike

the store merchants, we do not put Christmas away even when we pack away our decorations. Our lives have also been changed by Christmas and the Magi show us some important ways that this happens.

First of all, the Magi were not Jews. They were Gentiles and their very presence in Matthew's gospel tells us that this is a story for the outsiders. Their presence in Matthew's gospel is seen as a fulfillment of the scripture we heard from Isaiah. This is a call to "Aris, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." It's a word of promise to Israel that God will use Israel to bring glory to the world. A promise that the word of God will be a blessing to all nations. In bringing gifts, they incarnate the prophecy that "the nations" will bring their wealth when God's kingdom is established.

We are part of that group of Gentiles, part of the nations other than Israel. In Jesus' birth, in Christmas, we become sons and daughters of God, siblings of Jesus.

Secondly, when they arrived, they bowed down and worshipped. Mike Slaughter, in his book, "Christmas is Not Your Birthday" points out that when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, we make a decision to humbly submit to his authority. We decide to worship him and to give him the authority to define how we should be living our lives, and what our values in life will be. It is ridiculous for us to claim that God exists but to live in ways that do not take anything about God seriously.ⁱⁱ

The Magi are important to us because they were Gentiles who traveled a long distance and when they arrived they bowed down and worshipped Jesus.

Then they opened their treasure chests and gave gifts to the child. Slaughter says, "The resources of heaven do not fall from the sky, they are released through God's people. God creates miracles through the resources that you and I hold in our hands. Miracles occur when we release our treasures to Jesus; hands for the purpose of multiplying God's redemptive word in the world."

God has blessed us with many talents, abilities, and resources and it is up to us to use them to be a blessing for others. This week God presented me with an opportunity to be part of something that will make a difference for a few nurses and patients dealing with Covid. It won't even put a small dent in the nationwide or worldwide fight but it will help a small group of nurses and their patients. Personally,

what most affected me was the gratitude and the blessing I felt in being able to use some of my resources in a way that blessed people I will never know. That felt like Christmas to me; an opportunity to incarnate God's love to people I will never meet.

We can celebrate Christmas all year by using our abilities, talents, and resources in ways that bless others and that share God's love. When ordinary people like us release some of our treasures to Jesus, we become part of the miracles that occur on a daily basis.

The fourth thing that we can learn from the Magi is that they went home by a different road. Our belief in God, our worship of Jesus, means that we travel a different road than we would otherwise. It is this different road that causes us to use our resources in ways that bless others. It is this different road that leads us to challenge systems of injustice and inequity.

Without initially realizing it, the Magi challenged the political status quo when they asked Herod, where they could find the one born King of the Jews. Their question frightened Herod. In Phillip's Brooks 1868 Christmas Carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" we find these words. "Yet in the dark streets shineth, the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

In Jesus, people like Simeon and Anna found hope. People like Herod and others in power found fear. Out of his fear and self-interest, Herod lied to the Magi, asking them to tell him where they found him so that he could also go and worship him. Matthew tells us that they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went home by a different road.

This is a warning to us, that we cannot always believe what we are told by those in power. When their power is threatened, they will take actions that are motivated by their own self-interest, rather than what is right or needed by those who are dependent upon their decisions for their wellbeing. The Magi discovering that they could not trust what Herod had told them, went home by a different road. Joseph and Mary were also warned to take a different road, to flee Bethlehem because Herod and those in power, would try to kill Jesus.

We, too, are called to pay attention to the source of our information; pay attention to what we are being told and by whom. We, too, are warned to look to the motivation

of those with power, and to look to God for the truth about where, how and who we can trust. We, too, are called to travel a different road.

Like the Magi, we keep following the star – not a literal star, but we follow the Holy Spirit. We follow Emmanuel, God with us. It doesn't mean that our road will be easy and that things will always be good. We only have to look at all that has happened this year to know that the road is not smooth and is not easy. However, we know that we never travel that road alone because Emmanuel, God is with us.

Like the Magi, we were outsiders, but now we are all included in God's family. Like the Magi we come to worship the one who is the only God, the source of our trust and our life. Like the Magi, we open our hands and hearts to share our time, our abilities, our resources in ways that help others, bless those with whom we interact, and bring hope to a hurting and frightened world. In doing so, we keep Christmas all year long.

Every year I read a poem by Howard Thurman reminding us of the Work of Christmas. This year, I came across an updated version of it that speaks to us today as we keep Christmas alive every day and become vessels that bring hope to our world.

“When the carols have been stilled
When the star-topped tree is taken down
When family and friends are gone home
When we are back to our schedules
The Work of Christmas Begins
 To welcome the refugee
 To heal a broken planet
 To feed the hungry
 To build bridges of trust, not walls of fear
 To share our gifts
 To seek justice and peace for all people
 To bring Christ's light to the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Let us pray:

God of love, we thank you for the gift of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. Open our hearts and minds that we may better understand your call in our lives. Open our

eyes to see your presence around us. Guide our hands and feet that we may be vessels of your love to our hurting world. Give us words to share that bring hope to your people. As a new year begins, as Christmas decorations are put away, help us to keep Christmas with us all year in our hearts, our lives, our words, and our actions so that we may bring Christ's light to the world. Amen.

ⁱ This definition of incarnation comes from Feasting on the Gospels – Matthew, Part 1, Theological commentary on Matthew 2:1-12

ⁱⁱ Garland, F. Richard. In an article called, "Gold, Circumstance and Mud" posted on Facebook Dec 18, 2015 and again 12/18/2020 he draws upon Mike Slaughter for insights into the Magi visit. It is this article that provides an outline for points 2-4. Quotes are ones that he attributed to Slaughter.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shared by Bishop Latrelle Miller Easterling on Facebook on 12/26/2020. While hard to read, it appears that the author is Michael Dougherty.