



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON-DAY OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

MATTHEW 2:1-12 & ISAIAH 9:2-7

JANUARY 19, 2022

"MAGICIANS... ABOMINATIONS ... WORSHIPERS, OH MY"

In Deuteronomy 18, God tells the people of Israel, *"there shall not be found among you any-one ...who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium...for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord"* The passage goes on to say it's precisely because there are people who do these things in Canaan that the Lord is driving them out - so Israel can dwell there.

Magicians or sorcerers are not presented favorably in the New Testament either. Acts 8:9 describes a man named Simon Magus (*"meaning the Magic Practicer"*) who became a baptized Christian but nonetheless believed, like most Magicians of the day, that secret cosmic knowledge could be bought. So, he asked how to buy the Holy Spirit, at which point Peter scolded him, and that would be putting it mildly! Acts 19 says while in Ephesus Paul's preaching was so powerful that *"practicers of magic"* took their books, valued at 50,000 pieces of silver, and burned them. Paul may have had magicians in mind when, in our lesson today from Ephesians, he exhorts Christians to *"live as children of the light...have nothing to do with fruitless deeds of darkness."*

It's quite amazing then, that *"practicers of magic"* (Magi) are given prominent place in the gospel of Matthew. Popularly, if incorrectly known as "kings", these visitors, however many there may have been took their cues from the stars. Astrology has always been centered in the belief that the stars control human destiny and if you could read what the stars are saying, you have a handle on the future. That's why God warns Israel to stay away from it, and its practitioners - our creation story in Genesis insists it is God who made the stars and controls the heavens, not anyone else.

But Matthew's Magi give Magi a good name - or at least a better one. Traditionally this story also gives Israel a bit of a black eye. But it shouldn't unless we mistakenly conflate Herod with the Jewish people, which would be wrong. Better to regard the Jewish people by way of folks like Simeon and Anna, Jerusalem residents who Luke 2 says *"looked forward to the consolation of Israel"* and the coming of the *"Lord's Messiah"*. Nor should we equate "troubled Jerusalem" and "troubled Herod." Herod worried about his throne - the residents of Jerusalem only that Herod, upon hearing of a new born king, would throw another of his tantrums.

The Visit of the Magi is about the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, completes the introduction of Jesus and makes two announcements. First, Isaiah 9 is happening. The nations - in this case represented by Magi, those *"practicers of magic"* and, as Deuteronomy 18 asserts, *"dwellers in thick darkness"* are coming to the light. Israel is not the light, only the keeper of that light - light in a manger, light a mother's arms, light in the faces of folks who came to that manger and that mother. Second, Matthew is saying to Israel *"you have your king back."* Not the pretender, Herod, who bought his throne from an occupier from the west-Rome, but the true inheritor of the throne of David, a king in a manger, a king in his mother's arms - not just "a good king" but the king of goodness and mercy.

Isaiah 9 is a song of hope and was sung first to Israel - to the people of God known as the Jews

about a God of love revealed to the nation of Israel - but ultimately sung all "*people who walked in darkness.*" Some would say how utterly contradictory of God to choose Magi! Deuteronomy after all called them "abominable." In Bible speak, that's pretty bad. The tragic history of the region we now call the Middle East is that kings and their nations as often as not come to it simply in order to have at it - to take from it or impose themselves upon it.

How utterly appropriate of God then to choose Magi to show just what it was that took place when Jesus, "*conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit - was born of the Virgin Mary.*" Magi, Israel, the nations, the church, our congregations, you and I, in ways unique to each, walk in darkness - yet have hope because "*a light has dawned.*" How utterly appropriate for God to use Magi to guide our attitude toward this land we call holy - they came to worship the king who choose to come to bless, not curse, to provide, not take, to love people, not dominate them.

Israel in Isaiah's time sat in a darkness of idolatry, in Jesus time a darkness of misguided nationalism. Today, where once lay God in a cradle, the region known as the cradle of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is rocked not by lullabies but voices among all three faiths claiming a piece of creation as their own - giving little regard much less reverence to its Creator. In the process it has become anything but holy, particularly for its inhabitants - ironically members of all three traditions. What then does the mention of a few magicians have to do with the church in the Middle East, and we who for her today, pray?

Is it that we should go home and pack up those old Ouija boards we have in our attic and take them to the Goodwill? Hardly. This story tells us how God unites the things He loves, and he loves his creation. God gives deference to no culture, nor does God abandon any of them.

Rather, out of them all God works something we'd be tempted to regard as magical - the renewing of the minds and hearts of men and women of goodwill to listen, as certain Magi did to His leading, and to rise up out of the darkness of self-interest into the light of friendship, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, and charity. That we may be among such wise and faithful men and women, and worship God thusly, is why we are here today, and why ... we pray. AMEN.