

Wisdom Is Born

Isaiah 60: 1-3; Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany marks the coming of the three wise men to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus. Let's take a step back and remember that the Bible reflects the meaning of our life experiences. It is like a mirror we hold up to ourselves. Since the church has just concluded its Advent/Christmas season, this is a good time to hold the mirror of Jesus' birth stories up to our faith and take note of what they show us.

The Christian community wrote the gospels years after Jesus' death and wrote them in order to persuade people to see Jesus as the Messiah, the bringer of God's Kingdom on earth, and the revealer of the nature of that kingdom. Even later, well after the earliest drafts, they added birth stories of Jesus in order to express the meaning of his life and death. Each gospel treats the story of Jesus' birth differently.

Let's play a quick game. Of the four gospels, which one(s) tell about:

- Roman census (Luke)
- Mary & cousin Eliz.? (Luke)
- shepherds in fields? (Luke)
- angels singing? (Luke)
- Herod killing babies? (Matthew)
- wise men from east? (Matthew)

Mark's Gospel, the earliest in the New Testament, ignored Jesus' birth entirely, following Paul's example that Jesus was "born of a woman," (Galatians 4:4), implying that Jesus was conceived and born *in the usual way* of people! John's Gospel used a poetic reinterpretation of Proverbs 8 to frame Jesus as the living wisdom (Word) of God: in the beginning with God and, spiritually, one with God the creator. Luke's Gospel focused on Mary, her cousin Elizabeth, and the angels and shepherds at the manger. Luke alone told the story of a Roman census and a young couple's journey to Bethlehem.

Matthew's told a slightly different story. It seems that Mary and Joseph were already living in Bethlehem, in a house, when Jesus was born, according to Matthew's Gospel. Sometime after that birth, perhaps as long as two years, wise men from the east arrived in Bethlehem. They brought gifts to honor the birth of a king, but they sought a wisdom they did not possess.

Matthew also told the disturbing account of a massacre ordered by King Herod and the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus to Egypt. They later returned and settled in Nazareth where Jesus grew up. The three kings (wise men) who don't appear anywhere else in scripture except Matthew's Gospel, seem to have their origin in an interesting passage from the last section of Isaiah:

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. (Isaiah 60:6)

Why did camels bringing two gifts become wise men bringing three? This Isaiah passage marked the end of their great exile (Babylon). Part of this vision was of all nations coming to Jerusalem to receive the wisdom of Israel. In Matthew's Gospel, those representing human wisdom and the kingdoms of the world came to the birthplace of one who brought the new

kingdom of God. They came bringing gifts, but seeking the wisdom of the ages: the wisdom of God found in Bethlehem's child. It is this wisdom that Matthew invites us to seek as we follow our own star at Bethlehem.

Which wisdom do we seek? The book of Proverbs gave voice to wisdom in a passage John's gospel rewrote and ascribed to Jesus. Wisdom speaks:

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight. (Proverbs 8:26-30)

The wisdom of Proverbs reflected the near-Eastern culture of the Hebrew scripture. Very simply, wisdom was that health, wealth, and prosperity indicate God's blessing. The converse was also true that suffering, illness, and poverty indicated God had abandoned, turned against, a person. It was a fairly self-serving approach to wisdom that allowed the rich and powerful also to be "God blessed." But Jesus' wisdom, in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets (such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah), was counter-cultural. It was a wisdom that said humanity was flat, not hierarchical; circular and equal.

God loves the poor and oppressed and wants us to love and care for the poor and oppressed as well. Godly wisdom calls us to find our security in the well-being of all people. It is not okay, not wise, for any of us to have more than we need while others suffer and want.

Some years ago, I heard a preacher use an image that speaks to the birth of wisdom in Jesus. In the middle of the night, in a major, metropolitan municipality, evidently someone broke into a large national electronics store in the middle of the night. According to the police, there was evidence of a robbery. The alarm sounded. The police were alerted, but no robbers were apprehended. And there was one other curious factor. When the store manager reviewed inventory, she discovered that nothing was missing! The robbers failed to actually steal anything!

So business resumed and customers arrived. That's when the reality of what had transpired began to reveal itself. Customers purchasing small-ticket items, such as batteries, had the prices scan in at the checkout as exorbitantly high: hundreds of dollars! But then, people started bringing up flat screen TV's and I-phones. Those prices scanned as \$2 and \$3.95. All of a sudden, the reality of what had happened became clear.

The price tags had been changed! Low-cost items were very expensive and high-priced ones discounted. Highly-valued commodities were de-valued and vice versa. The wisdom Jesus taught and exemplified changed all the values of his world – and ours as well! He considered that power, status, and money of little value and only insofar as they serve to help and save people in need, to foster justice and equity between people. Compassion, generosity, solidarity with the poor, and identification with the powerless becomes the highest value -- to be greatly desired.

God's wisdom, personified in Jesus, was quite different from the wisdom of the world, the wisdom represented by the Magi. Like all people, we have to choose which wisdom we will seek and by which wisdom we will live.

That brings us to church. Being church means embodying holy wisdom. Author Parker Palmer has told us:

We arrive in this world undivided, integral, whole. But sooner or later, we erect a wall between our inner and outer lives, trying to protect what is within us or to deceive the people around us." (Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, 39)

Whether through pain or inspiration, we finally embark on an inner journey toward integrating our lives, toward being whole. Being church means creating and holding space, a *circle of trust*, where each of us can learn and hear our own inner teacher. This is space, not to force conformity or to indoctrinate, but to shape circles of trust "to support the inner journey of each person, [a safe place where people can] show up, speak their truth, and listen] to the prompting of the Spirit. (Palmer)

Being church is also being community where the inner journey flows into our shared life moving us to gather on a cold Saturday morning to sort donated food for Harvesters or join with other churches through the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity (MORE2) to work for justice, equity, and health in Kansas City. We gather as church, as community, with each individual a vital part. This is a place of shared solitude and contemplative action.

Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others, rather it means never living apart from one's self. It is not about the absence of other people. It is about being fully present to ourselves, whether or not we are with others. (Palmer, 55)

Community does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others, rather it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other. It is not about the presence of other people. It is about being fully open to the reality of relationship whether or not we are alone." (55)

As we embark on a new year, my prayer for each of you is to allow wisdom to be born in your life this year, "that you might find enough patience within yourself to endure, and enough innocence to have faith." (Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 87) Spirit of God, be our vision. Be our wisdom. Be our living Word in Jesus' name.