

1/8/23 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME

Welcome to Alexanderwohl on this bright winter morning.

We are glad that you are here, in this space or on Zoom, as we seek the light of Christ and worship together.

It is good to be with you after our family was away, a break that was extended a few days when a snowstorm between here and where we were in South Dakota blocked our routes of return.

Friday was Epiphany, the traditional celebration of the coming of Christ and the visit of the wise men.

CALL TO WORSHIP (ISAIAH 60 AND EPHESIANS 3)

All: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you!

Leader: See, darkness covers the earth, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

People: Lift up your eyes and look about you!

Leader: Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy;

People: Through faith in Christ we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Leader: The mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations has now been revealed by the Spirit.

All: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you!

INVOCATION

Christ,

May we receive the gift of your light today in all its mystery.

Help us to lift up our eyes and look about us. Embolden us to offer gifts of our own to You.

Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Many of you know James Schrag, former pastor at Tabor Mennonite Church and more recently was Exec. Dir. of the denomination. He's been ill with Parkinson's Disease and other complicating factors. He died yesterday evening at K-B with his family present with him.

Thank you God for the opportunity to be gathered here together this morning. Thank you for this building and the vision of those who built it, for those who've maintained it over the years and for those who continue to care for this beautiful space that we meet in for learning, fellowship and worship. We're grateful God, for this congregation – for those who give their time and energy to serve on boards and committees, those who teach and attend Sunday school and mid-week, for those who serve in the kitchen, providing meals, for those who clean up afterwards. We're grateful for those who tend to the grounds and the cemetery. Gracious God we acknowledge that our desire to be faithful to you, to be bound together by your love and to be a sign of your kingdom is what motivates and energizes us to BE this congregation.

Help us in this new year to be wise, like the magi, and to keep traveling on our spiritual journey together, to keep following your light and moving always towards Jesus.

We offer you our prayers of petition, God. We pray for those near and dear to us who may be sick in body, mind or spirit. We know and trust that you are the great healer even as we acknowledge that we don't always understand your ways. We thank you God for the news that Pastor Caleb's mother Gloria is cancer free. Give her and her family your on-going sense of peace and well-being. We pray for the family and friends of Jim Schrag. Be present with them in their grief and comfort them with their memories and faith in your love. Give all of us eyes and hearts that are open to receiving your goodness, your care and compassion. Give us minds that are open to your creativity and the ways your Spirit moves toward justice and right paths for this world. Although we're not quite sure *how* to pray, God we DO pray for the leaders of our government and for those around the globe. The earth itself and all of its inhabitants are crying out for compassion and care.

We pray for your people all around this world God. For those who are suffering from lack of enough and for those who are working to try to help. This morning we pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Ethiopia, at the Meserete Kristos College and their work. Continue to guide and support them.

Be present with us now, loving God, as we continue to worship and praise you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION

O God we thank you for opportunities to give back out of the bounty you have give to us. Bless these financial gifts and those who offer them. May this money be used to continue the work and ministry that you have given us here. Amen.

WE SAW HIS STAR – PASTOR CALEB

Matthew 2:1-12

When I was a kid, I became very interested in space after I learned from some cousins that there were planets.

I read books and memorized facts about the solar system. I wrote my own books around the age of 7. My mom sewed a binding with the sewing machine, and the ambitious projects usually lost steam after a couple of pages, with the remaining pages left blank.

My interest never extended to the point of getting a telescope or doing serious star gazing. I know how to find Orion, the big and little dippers, and the north star, and that's about it.

To this day, the stars fascinate me. On a clear night, I love being able to gaze at the stars on a clear night. Contemplating the stars helps me not to take myself or my life so seriously. They were the same ages before their light reached my eyes, and will be the same ages after I'm gone, whether or not I succeed or fail.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' birth is heralded by mysterious Magi who come from the east. The word "Magi" could mean "magicians" as it does elsewhere, or they could be a class of priests from Persia. Most scholars, however, think that the Magi are astrologers – people who study the stars carefully.

Ancient people discovered the planets by noticing that there were "wandering stars" that did not keep the same position in the night sky relative to other stars. The days of the week, for instance, take their names from the celestial bodies known to the ancients.

What was this "star" that the Magi saw?

Perhaps these Magi were observant enough to notice a new "wandering star" that hadn't been there before. I certainly wouldn't notice that, unless it was a new bright star smack in the middle of Orion.

Maybe this was a comet, going from East to West? Or maybe it wasn't anything documentable in the night sky, but simply a spiritual vision?

It does seem a little surprising for Matthew, the most Jewish of Gospels, to choose pagan astrologers as the heralds of the birth of the Messiah.

Maybe not so surprising if you read Isaiah 60 or other passages of the Hebrew Bible that anticipate the time when the God of Israel will be worshipped by the nations, and pilgrims from everywhere will come to Jerusalem.

Over time, as with all things Christmas, the tale of the Magi got embellished. They are not kings, and Matthew does not tell us that there is three of them, much less give them names like Gaspar or Melchior.

This passage even captured the imagination of this congregation back in Ukraine. The old church seal, references Matthew 2:2: "We have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." The words on the seal are: "Church seal of the Mennonite Congregation Alexanderwohl on the Molotschna."

But curiously, they chose to have Matthew 2:2 referenced. Why of all verses, did they pick this one? Apparently, they interpreted Russia/Ukraine as "East," and maybe understood themselves to have been following the light of Christ to Molotchna.

THREAT TO HEROD

Matthew's version of the birth of Christ spends the most ink not on Mary, Joseph, or Jesus, but on the Magi and King Herod. They come to the capital Jerusalem, inquiring about a new king, whose arrival they had observed in the night sky.

King Herod takes this very seriously, and he is disturbed, shook up. No tyrant can every rest completely secure in his power. This new king can only be a threat to Herod's power, and Herod is an addict of power.

Herod is crafty enough not to dissuade the Magi, but to use them as a tool to gain more information. He calls together the best intellectuals of the Hebrew scriptures to investigate where the Messiah is expected to be born.

Their answer is the little hamlet of Bethlehem, not at all a political powerhouse, but still significant as the hometown of King David.

If this is indeed the locale of a new king – someone pretty important if the stars say so – then this is the location of the threat Herod must covertly stamp out in order to remain in power.

While the Magi are wise enough not to return to Herod, a tragedy nonetheless overshadows the birth of Jesus. Herod plots to kill the little Messiah by murdering all the little baby boys of the town. This detail is uncomfortable and we prefer to skip over it.

Not even so joyous a story as the birth of Christ can be told without a note of tragedy and grief.

Anyone familiar with the story of Moses can't help but notice the parallels. Moses was providentially saved from the similar murderous scheme of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Just as the Holy Family sought refuge for awhile in Egypt, Moses sought refuge in another land until those who sought to kill him were no longer living.

When the Magi succeeded in finding the Christ child, they were overjoyed and worshipped. Literally translated, the Magi "*rejoiced a great joy exceedingly.*" That sounds pretty superlative to me. The NIV says they "were overwhelmed with joy."

I'm sure the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh surprised Mary and Joseph. I imagine Mary might have appreciated more practical gifts from some wise women even more: maybe a couple of additional sets of swaddling clothes, a new manger that meets the latest safety recommendations, and maybe a coupon for a well-deserved massage.

MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Many of us exchange gifts at Christmas time. It is one of the reasons that children so look forward to Christmas, and count down the days. If we are honest, we engage in this custom more because it is cultural, than that it is derived from our faith.

Nevertheless, Beth and I wanted to explain to Austin why we give gifts, and to have a little better answer than "that's just what people do."

We attempted explain that Christmas is more about giving rather than receiving. We've talked about the story of Saint Nicholas, and of course the story of the wise men bringing gifts to the Christ child. These are the earliest gifts that you could call Christmas gifts. They were not gifts received but gifts given.

The gift received is Christ himself.

What is the significance of the gifts given?

Both gold and frankincense are mentioned in Isaiah 60. The prophecy speaks of foreigners coming to Jerusalem, bringing wealth into the city, and gold and frankincense are mentioned as among the items brought. Frankincense was used in the worship in the temple, and there were likewise articles of gold.

Matthew seems to suggest not just that Jesus is future royalty, but that this child in some way represents all of Israel. That prophecies originally spoken of for the nation come to fulfillment in this one person.

This baby is the king chosen by God, the one who stood in for Israel as the righteous one, came also as a baby born into relative poverty. His family had to flee to Egypt as refugees because of the threat to Jesus' life.

BRINGING GIFTS

All this leads to the main point that I offer to us: **We must ask ourselves what gifts we can bring to Christ.**

They do not have to be gifts fit for a king. In chapter 25, Jesus predicts the time when he will say to compassionate people, *"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."*

These are all gifts of compassion, service, and love. The gifts of the Magi, symbolic as they are in the story, are unique to them. So too the gifts we have to offer are unique to us as people.

When I say "gifts," I mean something broader than the gifts represented in worship or exercised in congregational life. Our congregation very much needs and appreciates all the gifts of many people in order to function as we do.

But the "gifts" I'm talking about are more than what contribution you have for the church or work that you receive payment for. It's about what you do with your life in the service of Christ – gifts of compassion or gifts of creativity.

There is no guarantee that you will receive credit or compliments for your gift (nice as that may be). There is no guarantee you will receive payment or can make a career out of your gift. The most important gifts we have to share may not be what we are paid to do.

We run into two obstacles to offering our gift or gifts.

One is that we sideline doing so, because we are too preoccupied pursuing other things. The things we mistakenly think we want or think are more important.

The second obstacle is even more powerful. It is that we fall into the lie of thinking we don't really have anything of much value to offer. Many have been wounded at some point or another in our lives, and these wounds have planted the insidious doubt of the worth of our gift.

There is no one without a valuable gift to offer, even the gifts of vulnerability and apparent weakness. We must resist the voices that lie to us. We must take the risk of offering the gift that burns inside anyway. We must interpret mistakes and failure as learning opportunities, rather than a devaluing of the gift.

When we bravely lean into this space of offering gifts even when it means risk, we trust that we are blessing Christ.

Howard Thurman, an African American Christian and spiritual leader is credited as saying: *“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive”*

It might be easy for this quote to be abused to think that we are entitled to feel awesome all the time. I don’t know the full context of the statement, but it surely wasn’t meant selfishly.

We are alive as much when we are “in the zone” or filled with bliss, as much as when we feel uncomfortable – drenched in sweat under a hot sun, or aching muscles after hard work, or mentally exhausted from kid drama.

Another way to say it is that the gift that we are to bring to Christ is that contribution of love that your heart tells you that you cannot help but make. Your life would be incomplete if you didn’t follow through on this whether it is all joy or there is sacrifice and discomfort involved.

Usually we need to discern between our truest inner voice and competing inner voices that speak from our woundedness and selfishness.

The discipline of listening for God’s voice within to know the gift each of us is to bring to Christ is best complemented with the discipline of listening to those who know and love us best, and listening to the overarching Biblical story of God’s redemption.

We do not have a star in the sky to lead us to a literal infant Christ. But Christ continues to be a gift that is offered us anew.

May we receive the gift of Christ today and may that original Christmas gift animate the gift or gifts each of us is called to bear.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What lessons do you take from the story of the Magi?
2. What does it mean to diligently seek out Christ within our own reality?
3. What gifts do you have to offer Christ?

BENEDICTION

As you go today, may you receive the gift of Christ, in all its mystery and hope of restoration.

And may you be empowered to bring into the world your greatest gifts.