

01-07-24 Worship Service

Morning Prayer –

Creator God, we thank you for this time and this place to gather as your people. On this Epiphany Sunday we celebrate the gift of Jesus, the one you sent to be the Light of the World that the darkness can never overcome. We pray for courage and conviction to reflect that light in our own lives and as a congregation and a denomination – let your light shine through us.

Thank you God that Heidi and Luann are present with us this morning. Thank you for the conversation we just had with Luann in the Fellowship Hall and we ask for your blessing on her and on us and the Salina congregation as we begin to serve you and your church together.

O God, we bring to you our prayers. We pray for Steve and Sandy and their families as we celebrate the lives of Steve's parents. We pray for your continued presence with the Banman family.

We pray for the Boese family as they remember Ann.

We pray for others who may be grieving losses of loved ones or other losses this morning.

Thank you, God, for our schools and the learning opportunities that happen within them. Thank you for each student, teacher, staff person and all who help to make school happen. Bless each one in the process as they learn and grow.

We pray for the places close to home and far away where there is violence, whether it's in homes or work places or war zones. O Lord, we long for your Spirit of Peace and compassion to prevail on the earth.

Thank you for your presence with us now through the rest of this worship service and all the time! You have promised to be with us always, and we are grateful. Amen.

2024-01-07 Epiphany Sunday Sermon

In January, 2011 I went to Israel/Palestine with the Bethel/Tabor inter-term group led by one of my heroes, Patty Shelly. Patty was my first camp counselor at Camp Friedenswald, when I was a 4th grader; from then on our paths kept crossing in lovely ways. I was grateful to be on that trip with her for several reasons – she was one of my favorite theologians and teachers and song writers, she was funny and fun to hang out with and I absolutely and thoroughly trusted and respected her. I knew that there was *so much* to learn from her about that part of the world, about how that part of the world related to my understanding of the Bible and to my faith. I wasn't disappointed.

On the day that we travelled the 5 or so miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem the air was crisp and cool, but the sun was shining, unlike most of the other days when it had been raining and downright cold. There was a sense of excited anticipation – we were going from Jerusalem to Bethlehem! It was surreal. There was also a sense of anxiety and nervousness. Because to get from Jerusalem to Bethlehem you have to cross a check point and pass through the separation wall. Jerusalem is part of Israel. Bethlehem is in the occupied West Bank. We had been instructed to be sure we had our passports that day and to be quiet when the young Israeli soldiers came onto the bus, rifles in hand. We were to let Patty do the talking.

We waited while the soldiers asked their questions and Patty gave them answers. A few minutes later the bus lurched forward and we entered the “little town of Bethlehem”. The narrow streets were lined with shops full of beautifully carved olive wood pieces like these, hand-made jewelry, gorgeous woven scarves, leather bags and Jesus sandals (which, by the way, will give horrible blisters for awhile), and markets selling hanging legs of lamb and beef, vats of olives, fresh pomegranates and lemons, spices displayed in colorful, fragrant pyramids. Before long we were in Manger Square at the Church of the Nativity – where we waited in a long line to go down the stairs and into the grotto to see the tiny cave where tradition has it that Jesus was born.

The next stop, just a short walk away, was Shepherd’s Field – a small, open field where the angels appeared to the shepherds and delivered to them their tidings of great joy. Then the bus took us just another 3 miles or so, up, up... to get the best, panoramic view of Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the entire surrounding area – from the Herodian. This is a massive hill that King Herod had built just south of Bethlehem at the edge of the Judean wilderness. There was already a mountain there but Herod, renowned for his building projects, had more dirt put on top of the mountain and then built his palace up there. It gave him not only a strategic view militarily, but also gave him the power of intimidation and domination. The palace is gone, but the mountain is still there. The Herodian and Herod himself overshadowed everything and the evidence of that can still be seen these 2,000 years later. From the Herodian, Herod and his henchmen could see 360 degrees, for miles. But Herod was only looking down. In spite of all of his surveillance efforts, in spite of his access to the chief priest and the scribes, in spite of his own culturally Jewish background, Herod never saw the star.

But when those wise foreigners came knocking on his palace door Herod was suddenly looking up and very attentive! Not because he was curious, particularly, but because he was afraid, unnerved and threatened. And when Herod felt threatened, there was often violence and people died. No wonder his fear became everyone’s fear.

Did those wise ones from the east have any idea what kind of chain reaction their inquiry might set off? Granted, they weren’t from there, but surely they might have thought that to approach the sitting king asking where they might find the new king could have been perceived as problematic. Furthermore, they weren’t just asking for directions to find the child kings’ location, they stated that their purpose was to pay him homage. This basically meant that they were by-passing Herod and taking their deep reverence, respect and *worship* to someone else. So who were these wise guys and what made them wise? We know they were scholars and sky-gazers, so they were knowledgeable. But that’s not exactly the same as being wise. I read some interesting ideas this week about the wise men; they were suggestions of ways we could follow their examples and be wise like them.

First, the magi were curious. They had studied for many years and learned not only their own culture, history and religion, but they studied broadly and they were knowledgeable about cultures beyond their own. So although the Hebrew texts were not specifically *their* sacred

texts, they were familiar with the prophecies and the stories of Yahweh's faithfulness to the covenant people. They also realized, from their studies, that the powerful empires always fall. Even way back then, history had already shown that systems of unjust domination produce resistance and revolt. These wise ones were searching for better ways, they were looking up, paying attention, seeking more hopeful ways for humanity to live together.

Second, although they were highly educated and knowledgeable, the wise men were also open to *other* ways of knowing. They realized that knowledge is only one avenue towards wisdom. They were open to learning from the stars, from their dreams and from their own experiences. They were ready to embrace the possibility that this new light in the sky would lead them to a new hope for the world. They paid attention to the dream that sent them packing in a different direction to avoid Herod on their way out of town.

And third, they were willing and not afraid to get up and go, to get out of their comfort zones and travel to new, unfamiliar and even foreign lands in order to check out their hunches. They were wise, partly because they were risk-takers for the possibility that they might find what they had been seeking and hoping for. Or, at least they could confirm that it wasn't.

Do you know any wise people like this? Could you see yourself or someone else fitting any of these descriptions? I can identify multiple people in this congregation who demonstrate these traits already. Let's just take a moment and consider...

What would it look like for you to be more curious, to study and learn more broadly so that you might be able to be attentive to more hopeful ways for humanity to live on this earth? Are there ways that you could be more open to what we might call non-traditional ways of knowing? This might be things like prayer or meditation or journaling or talking with trusted friends to help discern the truth or the wisdom of what you're learning or thinking about. What are some ways that you could you move beyond your comfort zone and beyond your fears to be a risk-taker that leads you to the Light of the World? (read the text of 269)

Offering Prayer –

On these gifts we ask your blessing, Lord. May they be used in ways that glorify you and bring your kingdom here on earth. Amen.

Benediction –

Arise! Shine! Your light is come! Go into the world with gentle wisdom, reflecting the light.