

“The Wisdom of Worship”

Salado UMC—7 January 2018

Epiphany Sunday

Preaching Text: Matthew 2:1-12—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“There are seven sins in the world:

**Wealth without work,
Pleasure without conscience,
Knowledge without character,
Commerce without morality,
Science without humanity,
Worship without sacrifice
and politics without principle”
(Mahatma Gandhi).**

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The New Year affords us something that we all crave and probably need: the ability to start over. It is a great blessing to start over because it means that all those mistakes from which we were supposed to learn we can test. After all, if we have learned something, then we do want to know if we really learned it. So here we are in 2018. We stare down a new year and hope for the best.

In the hall of a church I once wandered through were words of inspiration, lovingly placed on bulletin boards. One said, “It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing because you can only do a little.” Another suggested, “Don’t get so busy preparing for a rainy day that you miss today’s sun.” A third stated: “Live so that each day you will neither be afraid of tomorrow or ashamed of yesterday.” The last one gives hope to all who believe in God’s promise paraphrased its message like this: “We needn’t worry about what the future holds if we know who holds the future.” Those bulletin boards told me a lot of good things and I share them as we enter into a new year.

One image of the New Year I like best of all the many images that we have seen over the last couple of weeks is an image of two calendars side by side: the old and the new. One is tattered and torn—covered by coffee spills, smudgy finger-prints, and ink smeared writing that only a pharmacist could decipher. The old calendar represents commitments made and kept. It is a symbol of the things that we have reckoned important and notes the priorities of our past year.

On the other hand—and sitting beside the old calendar—is a new one. Clean and crisp, with no embarrassing markings to tattle out our organizational skills or lack thereof. The new calendar represents the opportunities that await us and the chance to use our time more wisely in the pursuit of life as we want to live it. In a real sense, our lesson for today is all about the chance to evaluate where we are and where we want to go. Hear the day’s Epiphany lesson from Matthew 2:1-12:

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this,

he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:1-12).

There are really three primary characters in this story from Matthew: The Magi, Herod, and Jesus. The magi, from whom our word "magic" comes, are possibly members of a priestly class from Persia to the east of Judea (present day Iran/Iraq). Christian tradition gives them names: Casper, Balthasar, and Melchoir. Although we assume three of them, the text does not suggest a number. Tradition proposes three kings perhaps because there were three gifts and also because of the hymn, "We Three Kings of Orient Are" (# 254, *United Methodist Hymnal*). Yet, Matthew suggests they are sincere searchers for a child "who has been born king of the Jews."

By contrast a second biblical character, Herod, appears weak and paranoid. With Jesus' birth Herod begins to plot. He is the king of Judea, but looks more like a gang member protecting his turf from some unseen enemy. In a shrewd ploy, Herod asked the magi to divulge the child's location so that he could "also go and pay him homage." Herod reveals his true intention when he initiates the "slaughter of innocents." This deed forces Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to Egypt until Herod the Great's death. It is a shadow story similar to Moses' birth and Pharaoh's own "slaughter of innocents."

Matthew's final character in today's lesson is the baby Jesus. He is the object of worship. The magi pay him homage and Herod so fears what Jesus represents that Herod destroys all the male children fewer than two years of age. Herod does this simply to protect his power and his leadership. Although Jesus does not act in this text, Jesus is plainly the nerve center of the action. Each of the adult characters and their activity focuses on who Jesus is (Christology) and what Jesus has come to accomplish among humankind (soteriology).

So, if the magi or "wise ones" could suggest one thing for us today—as we start a new year—what do you think it would be? I think they would tell us that if we give the baby Jesus one gift it would be the gift of our homage, our worship. Socrates said, "Wisdom begins in wonder," and surely according to Christian scripture and tradition all life begins with worship. To worship or pay homage to Christ is to understand who we are and what direction God wants us to take in life.

So, as you kneel at this communion rail, remember it is Christ who has come for us so that we might have life and have it abundantly.

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