

December 20, 2020    The Foreign Servants    Matthew 2:1-12

Dearly Beloved;

It seems I am destined to begin this pastoral note with bad news. As you will be aware, the province is said to be planning to announce a lockdown of southern Ontario on Monday. If this occurs, I will be asking Session to extend the closure of St. Andrew's to public worship, at least to the end of January, 2021. It continues to grieve me to take leadership in this matter, but as I know you understand, it has to do with attempting to keep you as safe as possible. Large gatherings (large defined as more than your nuclear family) in doors represent a significant risk to us all. You know the drill, mask, wash hands, maintain a social distance, and use hand sanitizer as often as you can when out and about.

Christmas Eve, I will be joining efforts with Rebekah to produce, and play a small part, in a service of carols and lessons. Both Rebekah and I will be playing minor rolls supported by a larger cast of readers from Graceview in Etobicoke, with whom she serves. When the video of this service is ready, a link will go up on our website for your viewing. The advantage of this format will mean it should be available for Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day. You make the choice of when to watch it. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, plans have not been finalized, there may be no script available, as Rebekah and I may be sharing a sermon from the dining room table here in Belleville, or by Zoom if she is back in Etobicoke. She and Matthew will be with us for Christmas.

They are self-isolating in preparation for coming to be with us, as singles who live alone and can do what we have been doing.

I want to thank those who have taken the time to send a card, or call us on the phone to wish us a Merry, if different Christmas. I take this opportunity to offer the same to all of you. God is good...all the time. 2021 will not be easy for us I am sure, but slowly we will begin to return to something like "normal." God bless you, stay safe, and stay tuned. Below you will find the sermon for Sunday the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, "The Foreign Servants."

Melchior, rocked, forward and back, moving in the saddle of the camel beneath him. He wore clothing suited to the desert and its' cold nights. To his right rode his colleague Caspar, and on the outside of the trio Balthazar. They had been on this trek for months, travelling in caravan. They were surrounded back, front and sides, by a force of loyal outriders armed to the teeth and committed to their masters' safety. Each one wore a sword, carried a spear, and all had bows slung across their backs, a quiver of arrows hanging from their camel saddles. And then there was the long, outstretched body of servants of every kind. Some transported the tents that housed them by day. They travelled by night. Their three leaders were intent on the star to which they approached, but which always seemed to move before them, marking this trail of destiny. Behind the tent bearers, flocks of sheep and goats, shepherded by their handlers. Food on the hoof, and in quantity to feed every man and woman who was party to this expedition.

The truth is, we do not know a lot about the three men who made this journey in search of the baby born to be King. Part of the reason for that is the Protestant tendency to dismiss tradition as an accurate source for understanding Jesus teaching, or the words of the Scriptures in our Holy Bible. I'm an odd duck, as a Protestant and Presbyterian. My two trips to Israel, pre cancer diagnosis in February 2015, and post cancer surgery and treatment in 2017, convinced me that the traditions (based on mouth to mouth, communication, from generation to generation of the Jews) had a lot to teach Bible believing Presbyterians like myself. So yes, I believe more strongly than I ever did in my younger days, in the details of what I read in Matthew chapter 2:1-12.

I am convinced that Matthew, a faithful disciple (follower and student) of Jesus not only knew the details he shares with us in those verses, but that that information was common knowledge among the early believers in Jesus' divinity, HIS ministry, HIS crucifixion, and HIS resurrection on the Sunday, the 3<sup>rd</sup> day after HIS death. Tradition says his full name was Matthew Levi. He lived in Capernaum in Galilee, where he served his masters at the time as the tax man. He collected money to fund the Imperial occupation of Judah. And tradition says he died as a Christian martyr in Ethiopia, a long way from home. I have come to understand that life long service of that kind, has its genesis in a deep abiding faith in the Man who was the baby, born in Bethlehem. Christmas is a Festival. A birthday party. I feel the loss this year of having to mute the celebration. On the other hand, faith in this Jesus

drives me to write this and post it, and create a video to post on the web page so some can actually see and hear my voice, as I bear witness in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Jesus Christ is Lord!

In his saddle bags, Melchior carried a box filled with gold to present to the King of Kings who was the object of this search. Caspar, carried frankincense, a bark which when burned gave issue to an aromatic smoke that seemed to rise to heaven. He would give it in recognition of who Jesus is, God's Son, strong to save. Balthazar carried myrrh, an ointment used in the preparation of bodies for burial...this divine, king, would be crucified to save those who turned to HIM for hope. That is what we do. Faith is nothing more and nothing less than a turning to Jesus for hope, in terrible times. This Christmas season qualifies doesn't it. The pandemic is about people being sick, and more than a million and a half have died. A vaccine is a medicine than can prevent the sickness. I will take it when I can get it. But my hope is not in the medication so much as the One who gave inspiration to the researchers who have come up with the number of formulations we may live to receive. Hope is the unique gift of Jesus. Those wise men wanted to see HIM once, while they lived, because we are all mortal. Their journey was one of hope. Hope for the lost, hope for the lonely, hope for those who recognized their need of the King of Heaven.

Now, there are things to recognize in terms of what the Bible says about them here in the Gospel record. Notice this: it does not say how many of them there were. No number

is given in Matthew's account. Tradition says three. The Gospel record says they came, following that star which they had seen back east.

The record also says they arrived in Jerusalem and they did what strangers do in a strange place they have never been before. They asked questions. Surely the locals would know about this baby born to be King. That is how Herod found out about the baby Jesus. We deduce that the Wise Men had been on the road for about 2 years from this fact: Herod asked the question, "When did you first see this star?" And when he issued his death edict to kill babies in Bethlehem, it was a shotgun approach. He ordered the deaths of baby boys, 2 years old and younger. And in that terrible act, Herod fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah.

We are also told that that star reappeared and led the Magi to Bethlehem, and in fact to the house where Joseph, and Mary and the "child" were found. They were filled with joy when the star led them again. They had told Herod they were on a journey to worship the baby. When they saw HIM, that is what they did! They are on their knees, heads bowed to the earth presenting the gifts they have brought. And of course, that is the reason we have the tradition of gift giving at Christmas time. We imitate the wise ones who put their own lives on the line to find the "toddler," born to save.

They said to Herod, they would come back to Jerusalem and tell him what they had found and where the

baby was. They did not do that. They awoke from troubled sleep, packed up their stuff and headed for home by another route than the one they had taken. I have always assumed it was another angel incident. But that is not what the text says. It says God warned them not to go back to Herod. The implication is they fled for their lives.

You have patiently listened as I have made a list of the servants of God at ground zero that first Christmas. We had the willing servant: Isaiah the prophet. We had the obedient servant of God: Mary the mother of Jesus. We had the hesitant servant: Joseph, Mary's husband, and Jesus human father. We took a look at the terrified servants: the Shepherds. And now we have looked at the "foreign servants:" the Wise Men who saw wonderful news in the stars of the night sky.

There is a degree to which we have most in common with these foreigners. That is what a Gentile is in Israel, a non-Jew. For most of us that is our heritage. We are Gentiles, like the woman at the well. Like the centurion whose child was healed by Jesus. Jesus made this claim and the Scriptures make it over and over. Jesus came to save "all" the people. That includes you and me.

Take a moment to look at the night sky this winter. A star led people like us a long way (I don't know about you but I have taken a 2 year trip to anywhere), and yet, I have been on this road of faith travel, seeking and finding the

wonders of God's love for at least 60 years. God is good. All the time. Have a merry little Christmas.

Let us pray;

Thank you God for leading the wise men and women and young folk and children of every generation. Be with us in the journey. Cause us to touch lives with love, joy and peace. Amen.