

We heard this morning the well-known story of the “Wise Men,” and we also are singing the famous carol “We Three Kings.” So many questions and images come to mind. And surely you’ve heard the joke: “how do we know they were wise “men?” (Because if they were women, they would have brought more *practical* gifts, like diapers or baby bottles!)” Probably the foremost image in our minds is that of kings *kneeling* by the stable with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Some leave the kings out of the nativity scene altogether, knowing that most scholars agree these royal wise ones came when Jesus was a a child, a toddler. (The picture on the front of our bulletin shows the wise men greeting a radiant child.) As when Jesus was 12 years old in the temple, his precociousness or wisdom was surely way beyond his years!

We will never know the exact interchange between Jesus and “The Magi” from the east, but what I’d like to highlight is the humility, the seeking, the willingness to honor this child, on bended knee. This I believe is a deeper meaning of why the visitors were “wise.” Sure, they were very intelligent royalty, and probably scientific star gazers. But note their attitude, their disposition... Even when they got to Jerusalem, they began by asking questions of the local religious teachers: “We have heard there would be a newborn king for the Jews, and we saw a star rising over Jerusalem... yet where specifically do your holy books say this child will be born?” Then they hear about Bethlehem and go there to search for the special child. The wise men are life-long learners, and they seek One who will be a great teacher, a Messiah, an anointed one. They weren’t even Jews, but they would honor a new leader in the Jewish land. Very humble, AND very diplomatic! Our world could use more such diplomats!

I’d like to share a recent interpretation of this story by one of the UCC’s leading writers, Rachel Hackenberg. She writes:

When the seekers stopped in Jerusalem, their question to Herod – “where is the child who is born king of the Jews?” – was not only a question but also an invitation to share their curiosity and follow the star with them. But Herod didn't consider himself to be a follower, a fellow seeker on the path toward wisdom. He already had his wisdom. He was the king. He was in charge. He had a throne to preserve at all costs. That didn't make Herod a leader. It made him a doctrine, a self-contained set of answers, a human dogma that could not tolerate questions. Doctrines demand devotees and audiences. Doctrines love to be the star... The seekers from the East came to Herod with a question. It made them students... collaborators who need others to learn. Students need others to shine. And so it has been through the ages of humanity, that there are those who demand stardom, and there are those who wonder and wander, in joyful awe of the lights that shine beyond them... (and most of us are both). She prays: “For every jealous desire to be a star, forgive me. For every gift that shines and shares the way, O Holy Child, bless us.”

I think Rachel Hackenberg is one of our “wise women,” saying that the Magi were wise because they were like students, always questioning, always open to learning, yes even from leaders in foreign lands, even from leaders of foreign religions. We remember that one well known proverb says “the beginning of wisdom is awe or reverence for God.” Yes, it is truly wise to know that we do not know everything, that there surely are higher powers, higher knowledge, of which we only scratch the surface.

Our search has led us to the Christ, the anointed one of Bethlehem and Galilee, but we do not say he is the *only* path to knowing God. Our faith is not laden with exclusivity and superiority. We know that Jesus does not give us *all* the answers in life. His teachings and stories cover so much, but four gospel accounts

cannot possibly cover all our life situations. We remember that He, too, was said to grow in wisdom as his life unfolded. We can imagine that like the Magi from the East, Jesus would have honored other spiritual leaders, as he did his cousin John the Baptist. (“Truly I tell you among those born of women, there is none greater than John the Baptist.”) John returned the respect saying one was coming who was greater than himself, whose sandals he was not worthy to tie.

We honor and worship the child Jesus as at Christmas because of what we know he became. Whatever radiance and wisdom the Magi saw in the child Jesus was just a foreshadowing of how great he would later become. We call him Emmanuel at his birth, God-with-us, yet this is fleshed out later in his adult ministry. In the words of another wise teacher, Ken Medema, “HERE IS THE ONE who will bring the good news of peace, who will open the gates of love, who will raise up the humble and challenge the haughty.” For us who follow him, Jesus is THE ONE who is “The Way, The Truth and the Life.” He is the center and essence of all that is good; he is “the Vine and we are the branches.” He is the “Word become flesh,” and all we have to do is listen to him and follow him, if we want to live life to the fullest.

I pledge to continue to know and follow him as best I can, and often say that this time period, between Christmas and Easter, is the principal time when followers study his life; I join with Ken Medema in singing HERE IS THE ONE. And by the way... this song is part of a musical, that God-willing the virus don't rise, will be led by Ken this coming July at Carnegie Hall in NYC! The musical is called “The Weaver.” In sum, the “Weaver” is God, who has created a beautiful tapestry of life, which we humans have messed up, as we “walk in darkness” with tears, but God comes to salvage the creation, and save us by means of this Incarnate One who “gives Love a name.”

Join me and composer Ken Medema in following this One whose name is Jesus of Nazareth.

Here is the one who comes to give Love a name.

Here is the one who has come to show the Way.

Here is the one who has come to the dying,

Here is the one who gives hope to the homeless,

Here is the one who will open the gates of Love.

Here is the one who will raise up the humble,

Here is the one who will challenge the haughty,

Here is the one who will bring the good news of Peace.

His words have been spoken time and time again; yet, we will not hear him when he calls to us. His message is written down in countless books; yet only if we will ever hear him, and follow him.

Here is the one whose life will never cease;

Here is the one whom death could not contain.

Here is the one who makes Joy out of sadness,

Here is the one who brings Hope in the madness,

Here is the one whose Life will never cease.

Let's be honest; we are all searching for something, something that will give our life more meaning, more peace, more love and joy! Sometimes we hope that we will find it in a new kitchen, a new relationship, a new pet, or even a new antiviral pill. All good things, that can give a new start or new birth, but the Christian story is that Jesus is *ultimately* the Way, the Truth and the Life, who can give us *fullness* of life and joy. With the Wise Men and Women of old, let's keep searching for Him and His Way, reading His teachings and stories, and praying with His Spirit. AMEN.