**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC 1/11/15**

***Magi Moments***

**A Sermon for Epiphany by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**WELCOME**

Today we are celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord, which is the arrival of the three Magi, also called Wise Men or Kings, in Bethlehem, with their rare and sumptuous gifts for the Baby Jesus.

Epiphany has a fixed date, January 6th, twelve days after Christmas. At West Center Church we celebrate Epiphany on the first Sunday after January 6th, unless of course, January 6th falls on a Sunday.

Verse five of “The First Noel,” this morning’s Processional Hymn, has set the stage for us:

 “Then entered in those wise men three.

 Fell reverently upon their knee,

 And offered there in His presence,

 Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.”

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Matthew 2:1-12

The Gospel Witness for today tells the story of the Epiphany. The Magi have been traveling for twelve days, following a luminous star as their GPS. The Magi stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions, and soon thereafter, the star leads them to the Baby Jesus in Bethlehem, where they present Jesus with their gifts most rare.

**SERMON**

The arrival of the Magi, first in Jerusalem and then in Bethlehem is a truly extraordinary event.

Mary and Joseph are simple people, who traveled to Bethlehem, the city of David, for the Roman census. Mary and Joseph are so unassuming, that even though Mary is about to deliver a child, they accept a place in the stable, when there is no room for them in the inn.

Their son’s lowly birth was of no consequence to the high and mighty religious and civic leaders in the great city of Jerusalem. Herod the King and the chief priests and scribes of the temple, notice nothing unusual. They have seen no star in the East. They hear no angel telling shepherds, “Fear not. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

For Herod and the religious leaders the end of December 2000 years ago was business as usual. Nothing extraordinary had happened recently or perhaps ever, in the little town of Bethlehem about six miles away.

The Holy City of Jerusalem knew nothing of the birth of a Savior, which is Christ the Lord, until the three foreigners arrive in town, riding camels and wearing rich and colorful robes, asking, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star at its rising and have come to worship him.”

With this news, Herod is both startled and frightened, and calls the chief priests and scribes together and asks them what their holy scriptures say about where the Messiah is to be born.

The chief priests and scribes do not let Herod down. They soon find the scriptural references that Herod is seeking. The prophet Micah (5:1-2), names the Messiah’s birthplace as Bethlehem, and the prophet Isaiah (60:1-3), writes, “Arise, shine, for your light has come … Nations shall come to your light, and *kings* to the brightness of your dawn.”

Herod tells the kings that the baby was born in near-by Bethlehem, asking only that they send him word exactly where in Bethlehem Jesus is, so that he too may go and worship him.

Of course Herod has something sinister in mind. Herod has no interest in worshiping Jesus, nor in bringing him gifts, even cheap gifts from the Dollar Store. Herod’s plan is to do away with his rival, the infant king of the Jews, once and for all.

After the Three Kings assure Herod that they will send him news of the whereabouts of the baby Jesus, they resume their journey. The Star of Wonder leads the Kings right to the house where Jesus lay. Evidently, some twelve days after Jesus was born, there finally is room in the inn, room in the inn for the Holy Family.

The Magi waste no time on pleasantries. After a brief introduction, each kneels and presents his gift to the newborn king. The first gives Jesus gold, the second gives Jesus frankincense, and the third gives Jesus myrrh.

Although the Magi’s gifts are not exactly what Mary and Joseph need to help them care for their infant son, Mary and Joseph no doubt are stunned by the Magi’s devotion to their baby and the great distance they had traveled to find him.

After presenting their gifts, the Magi do not stay around for small talk and to admire the baby. They have things to do and head for home. And having been warned in a dream not to reveal to Herod Jesus’ whereabouts, the magi return to their own country by another road, bypassing Jerusalem.

There are many spiritual lessons to be learned from the story of the Three Kings, their journey and their gifts. One lesson to be learned that is quite popular is that the arrival of the kings, from so great a distance, kings who were not even Jews but most likely Zoroastrians, points to the fact that the birth of Jesus is an international event, an event of global consequences.

For many people throughout the millennia, Jesus is Lord, Lord of all the earth. The Three Kings are the first to recognize Jesus and honor Him as Lord of all.

And while this point is valid and important theologically, I like to make the story of the Wise Men and their gifts more personal. I like to invite them ---- invite the Magi, the Wise Men, the Kings into our house, into our church, to welcome them and to receive their gifts.

You might say that the gifts are for Jesus, not for us, but another name for the Church is the Body of Christ, and so we also are invited to receive the gifts of the Magi and to share them.

Each of the three gifts stands for something different, in faith and in life. So let’s unwrap each gift and see what it is.

The gift of gold is most straightforward. Gold is precious and has always been precious in civilizations flourishing long before the Christian era, long before Jesus was born.

The gift of gold underscores the preciousness of life, reminding us that life is rare and wonderful, that each of our lives is rare and wonderful. Life, precious though it is, is not to be hoarded, but rather, to be shared, as the Magi share their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh with Jesus and with us.

The gift of frankincense is the gift of the holy. Frankincense was an essential ingredient in the incense used in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Its use was highly regulated by priestly codes.

Frankincense was most rare and costly, but like gold, frankincense is not to be locked away in a vault, never to see the light of day. Frankincense is to be burned.

Frankincense evokes the holy, the holiness of God, the holiness of Jesus, the holiness of all Creation, the holiness of West Center Church, the holiness of each of us and the gifts we bring to the world. The Wise Men bring us the gift of frankincense, the beauty of holiness.

If gold presents the preciousness of life, and frankincense holiness, what does myrrh represent?

Myrrh is fragrant resin from certain shrubs and trees. Myrrh was an important ingredient of sacred anointing oil. Myrrh was used to relieve pain. When Jesus is suffering on the cross, he is offered wine mingled with myrrh to ease his suffering. Myrrh is also one of the spices that is brought to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus for burial.

The gift of myrrh may be seen as foreshadowing Jesus’ suffering and reminding us of his painful death. And yet we must remember that myrrh is used to alleviate suffering, and that Jesus rises from death before his body can be anointed for burial.

And so myrrh symbolizes God’s great love, a great love that relieves suffering and conquers death, giving us life eternal in a love without end. “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts.” (Psalm 84:1)

And so when we hear the story of the Three Kings or see paintings or nativity sets that include them (and such a nativity set is on the piano in our own Bodge Lounge), let us remember that the three wondrous gifts they bring to the newborn king are gifts for us as well, gifts making manifest the preciousness of life, the holiness of life, and the eternal love of God which is life eternal.

A blessed Epiphany to us all! Amen.

**HYMNS OF RESPONSE**

This morning we have two Hymns of Response; both are hymns of Epiphany.

The first is Hymn 66, the majestic “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” and the second is Hymn 63, the joyful “As with Gladness Men of Old.”

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