

The Sunday of the Epiphany, January 6, 2013 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton

So how many visitors – Magi – showed up in today's gospel passage? In Christian tradition we've ended up with three – but actually even though Matthew never mentioned how many, those who followed were not shy about claiming to know! The number's varied from two (see the art in the Roman catacombs of Sts. Peter and Marcellinus) to twelve (in some medieval Eastern lists).

All of which is to say that we shouldn't be taking this reading too literally, but asking about it's symbolic content. When we do that, all four of today's readings come together, drawing us toward one, inevitable conclusion.

That conclusion isn't predicated on Jesus being the Son of God, or even – if you engage seriously in any contemporary interreligious dialogue, as I do – that Jesus is a remarkable and unique reflection of the Divine – though such claims to Sonship and uniqueness permeate both the Letter to the Ephesians and Matthew's Gospel.

That inevitable conclusion is this: that **at the heart of God is a compassionate love for every human being, no matter their faith. Peoples of all faiths stand shoulder to shoulder in the face of the glorious gift of God's grace.**

Isaiah talks in glowing terms of the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon to the City of Peace – Jerusalem, still in piles of rubble; followed by a vision of a similar pilgrimage of the Gentiles to the now-restored city of Jerusalem at the end of the age. Jew and Non-Jew standing together experiencing the exhilaration of God's embrace.

The Psalmist talks of the messianic king who brings justice and compassion for the poor, and sees the acknowledgment of that messiahship as universal – going beyond Judaism and embracing all of humanity.

The letter to the Ephesians is regarded by many modern scholars as the work, not of Paul, but of one of the next generation of leaders he trained, writing after his death. This leader, looking back, was in awe of Paul's achievement in maintaining the unity of Jew and Gentile in the one Church, and wanted to underscore (among other things) the universality of God's salvation through the Messiah.

And Matthew's theme is identical. And although Matthew rather curiously doesn't mention Isaiah or Psalm 72 – curious because he has such a special interest in the Old Testament – it's clear that both parts of our first reading, and much of the second, the psalm, informed his description of the visit of the Magi – gentiles making a pilgrimage to the symbolic “New Jerusalem” found in Jesus, right down to the gold and frankincense. Matthew adds myrrh – a burial spice – because he wants us to remember how the story of Jesus almost ends. Even the star is congruent – a star had been regarded as a symbol for the Messiah as early as the Book of Numbers (24:17)

For Matthew, too, the point was clear – Gentile and Jew stood together as those blessed by God.

I think it's fascinating – and tragic – that for some time after Jesus' death, Jewish and Gentile believers were so close together – a closeness that, in the genuinely eastern Church (not the so-called Eastern Orthodox, which is a western Church) continued well into the fifth Century – yet for centuries afterward have been so far apart.

Part of which is to say that our way into the future as followers of the One God can be infinitely more fruitful if we embrace our common ancestry as followers of Yahweh and believers in Jesus.

This season – the Nativity season that stretches from December 24 to today, and is book-ended by two celebrations that are much more alike than different – this season has some significant overlap with that of our Jewish forebears. Not only is it always roughly the same time of year as Hanukkah, but the connected themes of light and of God's presence permeates both. Whether it's Menorah candles, or Advent candles, whether it's human rededication of a place fit for the indwelling of God – the Temple – or a human recognition of a unique person as the human manifestation of the indwelling God – Jesus – the fundamental vision is presented the same way: of light in the darkness, celebration and joy, and an awareness of a particularly unique moment in human history in which God is present in a new way – God is manifested, to use a fancy word.

That word is an invitation to all of us, on this day of Revelation. While it is certainly worth asking what gifts we might bring to God – mirroring the gospel story – I think it's just as valuable, or even more so, to ask ourselves how we can be manifestations of God in our world, to ask what gifts God has given us to reveal to others.

This is to take the season of Light and of Revealing (because that's what the word "Epiphany" means) and to turn it outward. We have been blessed – how now, can we be a blessing to others?

That's what – symbolically – Matthew asks of us: to have the same mission-sense as the Magi – because that's the fruit of their encounter: they returned to their distant, foreign homes celebrating and carrying Good News about the birth of a non-Gentile, a Jew, to those who made up their families.

Can we do that? Carry Good News about God's compassion and love to all the "beyonds" of our own lives and to the people who populate them? To get out of our comfort zones? To go father and deeper?

Can we allow ourselves to be surprised, and changed, by our encounter with the Life that is the Light of All things, that was present at creation and continues to light our ways?

That, I believe, is the challenge of this season of Light. I invite you into that challenge. Don't expect to find all the answers! But some of them are there, if we are open to the leading of the light. Amen.