

**“An Odd Assortment”
(Mt 2:1-12)**

1/9/22
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This morning’s Gospel will be familiar to all of us. Several wise men, sometimes portrayed as kings, are searching the skies and reading scripture. Each comes across the same star in the sky; a star that beckons to them with a mysterious promise.

The star draws them out on a journey that leads past the devious Herod and his henchmen (the Biblical equivalent of today’s cynical power brokers). And it stops above a manger at which, by combining the separate gospel accounts and considering the usual inhabitants of a barn, we can imagine an unusual crowd that has gathered.

They form an odd assortment of people and animals, all gathered around the infant Jesus in perhaps the last place you would expect to witness the “birth of a king”. And upon discovering him, the story tells us, they are overwhelmed with joy. The wise men proceed to offer him homage, pouring out before him the various treasures they have brought with them. And the shepherds, according to the Gospel of

Luke, excitedly go about spreading the news of what has happened, then go home praising God for all they have seen.

Seekers

If we compare Herod and his henchmen to the cynical power brokers of today, then maybe we can also think of the wise men as representing today's "Seekers." They seem similar to people today who are trying to make sense of their lives, yet feel that something is still missing; that there is still some critical connection they have not yet made; some "aha" experience they have not had. And their hope is that, by following the promise of the star, they will come upon the answer they seek.

On meeting Herod, they instinctively know that his involvement presents a danger to the truth they are seeking; they are definitely not looking for the fear and insecurity that Herod's court reeks of. So they give him wide berth on their return journey.

Shepherds

The Shepherds are cut from different cloth. They seem more like people who just happened to be there when the angels burst into chorus in the skies above. Unlike the wise men, they don't have the

time to spend hours searching the skies or plumbing scripture for answers. Their focus is on the practical matter of making sure their flocks are safe and well tended. But they too are drawn into the odd fellowship that gathers at the manger.

The light of Christ witnessed by this gathering was a light of beauty and truth that did something beautiful in their hearts. And so the beauty of the manger scene is not restricted to the singular beauty of the infant Jesus himself, but extends to the whole gathering.

And I think that this is true also of a worshipping congregation like ours, which is in many ways a continuation of the manger scene. Part of what makes a congregation beautiful is the assortment of people who gather to witness to and be transformed by the light of Christ. The beauty of that light around which we gather, comes not only from the radiance of the baby Jesus himself, but also from the variety of faces on which his light is reflected back to us, warts and all.

Church Choirs

One of the ways this beauty was revealed to me was way back when I was a minister in Hawaii. Now and then, the Association would have a

joint event where the choirs of the UCC churches on the island would gather. Each choir would sing a couple of hymns, there would be a sermon and offering taken, and there would be a lot of eating and fellowship.

When each choir sang it was a unique experience. Obviously, they were not professionals and there were gaps in their ranks, sometimes only one bass, perhaps one or two singing a little off key. A hymn or two would be sung in Hawaiian and many other favorites from the same hymnals that are in front of you this morning.

It is hard to describe the pride and joy I felt when the choir from my church got up to sing. There was nothing that remarkable about their appearance. But to me they were a vision and music from heaven. It was more than just hearing them sing a good hymn well. It was also the feeling of kinship I felt with them from the time spent together, socializing, at choir practice, in committees, pulling off events, knowing important parts of their stories and struggles and being a part of the one big story together.

Attending those choral gatherings and seeing the choirs of all the Association churches one after another, also helped me to have a sense

of what it means to be moved by God's "greater love", because the feelings of love and gratitude that I felt for my own congregation seemed to naturally extend to all the choirs that were gathered. And the same must have been true for the many appreciative members of each congregation who came in support of their own choirs.

Gathering at the Manger

Part of what I have also realized over the years is that there is a reason why what the wise men found, when they arrived at the place where the star stopped, was a gathering. And the reason is because, the light did not come to lead us to an experience of salvation that can be born out of isolation.

God's salvation is something that we experience as beings who have been drawn together into a community around the light of Christ. And in that light, we discover that salvation does not come to us through some personal intellectual or spiritual achievement. Instead, God comes to us through the bonds of love that form, when we find ourselves witnessing together in a community brought together by the light of Christ.

The experience of salvation that causes us, like the "Three Kings", to pour out our gifts before Christ on bended knee is not based on a

superior achievement on our own parts, but on a blessed humbling that comes to us when we are finally knocked off the pedestals by which we held ourselves apart as somehow exceptional.

The Master Quilter's Hand

And part of what makes this experience of salvation so wonderful is that we can catch glimpses of God's hand at work making it happen. I think that God is a bit like a quilter and we are like varying scraps of cloth, almost a random assortment that has been drawn together both purposefully and through random circumstances. There is a unique story behind the journey each scrap of cloth that makes its way to the cloth bin.

But once all the scraps are gathered, like a quilter with an eye for interesting combinations, God begins to sew them into surprising combinations. And our eyes and imaginations are delighted by the ways God joins them into patterns and combinations that suddenly work together in a previously unimaginable way; something new and wonderful is brought into existence that has never existed before.

As individual scraps of cloth, we have our own inner patterns that seem very well coordinated to us. Apart from others, we think we know

which way is up and which way is down, who's behaving properly and who isn't. And so, especially in this day and age, we are quick to judge, condemn and move away. We say to ourselves, "I don't want to be confused by that person's way of thinking or deal with the hassle of being accountable to a group."

But in church, God puts us side by side with other bits of cloth that represent very different and seemingly incompatible patterns which, when they are sewn together in covenanted relationship, can generate a beauty that would not have been possible, if the whole quilt had been simply from one design. So that I think that one of the most beautiful and God blessed statements we can hear ourselves say is "I don't get Ted or Alice or whoever it is. But "gosh darn it," I love him or her anyway. I just do.

Courage and Covenant

I think it takes courage to become part of a church. It takes a willingness to suspend judgement and to be open to relationships in ways that challenge our previous judgements. And I can't think of anything that is more important today than our commitment to being in community with each other, not only because of what we agree on, but because of how important it is that we defy being separated by our disagreements.

I think God needs us to sit still side by side with each other, with open hearts, maybe not even try to change each other, so that God can sew us together with the golden threads of love.

We can't always gather in person during this pandemic, but I think that makes it all the more important that we gather, when we can.

What are you doing here?!

I remember a memorable sermon in which a minister once preached that, when we get to heaven (if we get to heaven), we will probably look around the heavenly banquet table and say to ourselves, "How did that he (or she) get in here?!?"

I thought it was a wonderful sermon, because it exposed the difference between what we think, when we look at others from our own point of view, and what God sees, as the one who looks directly into each of our hearts. The sermon was also wonderful because it revealed God's sense of humor. The joke is on us, who in the course of our lives have taken our own judgements about others so seriously, and been so quick to withhold our good will that we denied the heaven that could have been on earth.

The Gathering at the Manger

So to recap, I think that this morning's Gospel, by bringing the wise men, shepherds, Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus together under the star, is telling us that our salvation is not something that happens as an isolated experience, but one that brings us into community that may not originally seem that compatible.

And tradition has embellished and more sharply emphasized the diversity and seeming incompatibility of this gathering, by adding a variety of animals that are not mentioned, by making the wise men into "kings", to emphasize the distinction between the mighty and the lowly shepherds, and by making one of the kings black and another oriental. So that when we look on the harmony of the manger scene as it lies there beneath the star of God's promise, we see a scene that tells us that "No matter who you are, you have a place in the gathering that God is sewing together here.

The scripture also tells us that all of this takes place within a reality made perilous by the Herod's of this world; a way of reminding us of the very real and dangerous presence of evil and that the course we choose through life is of great consequence.

Last Sunday, when LuAnn handed out pledge cards, she told us all not to worry about putting our pledge amount on the outside of the envelope. That it is nobody's business what amount you give. And I agree. While the church does need to have a good idea of what it can budget, I believe that the most important gift you can bring is yourself and the courage to be present with an open heart, and to hold still when necessary, so that God can sew us together into a beautifully patterned quilt that expresses God's own heart in a way that will be worthy of our endless admiration and praise. For it is by God's handiwork that the world will be saved.