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St. Thomas Church  
Christmas 2B; 1.3.21  
Jer. 31:7-14; Eph. 1:3-6,  
15-19a; Matt. 2:1-12

## **Will the Real Christmas Please Stand up?**

Some of you may remember the Old TV show called “To Tell the Truth.” Remember how it worked? One contestant would be the secret, but actual person and the two other contestants would be the imposters attempting to pass themselves off as the real person. A group of panelists, who through a series of questions, would then try to guess who the real person was. At the end of the round the panelists then voted on which of the three contestants was the real person. Prize money was then awarded based on how well the imposters fooled the panelists into thinking they were someone they were not. In the climatic end, the host would always say, “And will the real Mr. Jones please stand up.”

Some of you may be asking the same about Christmas 2020: “Will the real Christmas please stand up?” Did it really happen? Can it still happen? Do I want it to happen? Should I keep waiting for it to happen? (After all, theoretically, the church calendar says there are 12 days of Christmas, not just one). “Will the real Christmas and better New Year in 2021 please show up and stand up?”

We are as much in search of answers and a new direction as those three wise men in today’s gospel story who have traveled miles and miles to find and follow the spiritual path that God desired for them. We are likely still swimming in an ocean of emotion as we try to address the usual ghosts of Christmas’ past still while processing the many ways our normal Christmas season has been disrupted.

I believe that today’s gospel story can assist us. Let’s start with the question, “Will the real King Herod please stand up?” The chapter begins with a cunning King who tries to trick the out-of-town visitors—the wise men from the East—into thinking he is in fact a religious man that wants to find the messiah so he can worship him. Misinformation, disinformation, and the lack of truthful information are alive and well in first century Palestine just like today. Few of the locals fall for it but the out-of-towners are the perfect victims, so Herod thinks. Herod is not authentically seeking God’s direction or any direction from anyone else other than himself. He is the notoriously evil king!

And it won't take long for his true colors to be revealed. He soon will be ordering the execution of all male babies in the region under two years old--any young soul that could possibly be Jesus—a challenge to his reign of terror. Herod's rage, jealousy, and addiction to power and violence keeps him from seeing the true star in the sky—God's star--the star that the wise men ultimately decide to follow.

“Will the real wise men please stand up?” We don't know as much about their true identities or even how many wise men there were, but tradition suggests there were three—one for each gift represented in the story. They were Magi or Magicians who had gone to the ancient equivalent of seminary. They were likely members of a learned priestly class from Persia who studied the stars religiously and were followers of Zoroastrianism. They would have likely been seen by the religious leaders of the time as suspect and a bit sketchy as they were classified, rightly or wrongly, as akin to magic-makers and sorcerers.

But today's story clearly indicates that they are spiritually savvy and attuned to the movements of God despite Herod's deception and lies. Their spirituality brings curiosity, kindness, and generosity into a world ruled by a King who rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem but whose greater legacy was his reign of terror. They remind us, too, that no one religion has a monopoly on the truth. Sometimes it takes engagement with others outside our faith to see the treasures within our faith. We do not have to be afraid of the truth of God—no matter how it arrives to us—and wherever it may be found.

I am reminded of the story told about the great ancient Persian poet Hafiz. Once a young woman, seeking spiritual direction asked him, “What is the sign of someone who knows God?” Hafiz remained silent for a few moments and looked deep into the young woman's eyes, “Dear, the ones who know God have dropped the knife—that they so often have used on their souls and the souls of others. “The wisemen have a right to retaliate but they don't. They refuse to give into Herod's dark energy—they keep focused on what is life-giving and their gifts manifest radical and prophetic generosity.

These wise men help us to see that there are in fact two Christmases. Pastor Jim McEachran who recently preached here at St. Thomas and a wisdom bearer in his own right has helped me to see this truth. The far better-known celebration is Christmas Eve where we receive the gift of Jesus being born into our world. The second Christmas is known as Epiphany (remembered this Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup>). It is our chance to give, not receive.

Inspired by the hope received on Christmas Eve, we now prepare to offer our gifts to God for the service of whole world. The first Christmas is about receiving gifts. The second Christmas is about giving gifts and passing love forward.

Let's take a closer look at those Gifts. *Gold*. The gold they brought to the baby Jesus was fit for a king or queen—we are to share our material wealth to those most in need. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were refugees fleeing from the oppression of a tyrannical ruler. Like the wisemen, we need to see God's truth about the gifts of justice and provision for those who feel excluded from the household of God.

*Frankincense*. The gift of frankincense is for worshipping God and seeing the Holy in everyone—therefore fitting for Jesus, our great high priest, but also a way to honor the royal priesthood of all believers—the priesthood to which every baptized Christian is called to live.

*Myrrh*. The gift of myrrh was used for anointing the sick, the dying and those called to ministry. Jesus would grow up to be—a healer and reconciler and die to self. It is the path we, too, are all called to walk as Christians. Our families, our churches, schools, and our nation desperately need us to bring all of these gifts to Jesus who continues to be in the hearts of those who are suffering, hurting, and fleeing from dangers of every kind.

“Will the real Jesus please stand up?” Christmas leaves us with a lot of questions about how we truly see Jesus. Some are more comfortable leaving him in a cozy manger—Jesus meek and mild and then fail to see him as a fully grown adult--sometimes as a fierce and forceful prophet of love. The hope of Christmas is that the internal gift of Jesus' presence in our hearts keeps growing. The hope of Epiphany is that the external gift of manifesting generosity towards others keeps growing. And what is the surest sign that you have arrived at Epiphany: pure joy. When the star stopped over the place where the Christ child rested, we are told that the wisemen were “overwhelmed with joy.”

Well, please let me introduce you to one who knows this joy. A local sage, Houston Kraft, from Snohomish, is a gifted evangelist for spreading the Good News of deep kindness in our world. He doesn't appear old enough to be a wise man. But don't be fooled by his youthful age. He is a professional speaker with a special mission of developing curriculum for children and adults on how to create “gentle revolutionaries” for the new year.

Gentle but revolutionary. People of all ages learning how to set firm, and forceful boundaries non-violently as well as practice radical acts of compassion in a soft, nurturing, and tender way words to those who have been hurt by others or our hurting others. In his mind deep kindness is both forceful and gentle at the same time. His message is so much deeper than that just being polite and having good manners. It is unkind to let violence in word or deed to go unchecked. Wouldn't it be a great gift to our church and community if he came to teach us? I knew there was one more Christmas present to unwrap, one more gift the wise ones must bring—a visit to Medina by Houston Kraft.

This Christmas, soon to be epiphany, I encourage you to keep looking for the star. We need to keep looking for the star that can lead us to joy and a fresh beginning, a new year, and a way forward. Know that the star can appear anywhere—often in the most unlikely places--but start with looking inside your own heart. Know that the first Christmas has arrived. You have been given the gift of Jesus' presence. The second Christmas of Epiphany awaits you and God's beauty will inspire you to follow God's star and inspire you to offer your gifts until joy arrives.

So, be brave! Be True. The real Christmas, the real you, and a better new year will stand up! Amen.