

Christmas Eve 2008 7:30pm

Rev. Jeff Cheifetz, Interim Minister

The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I don't quite know why I am so fascinated by King Herod. Maybe because he is the epitome of the paranoid who uses his power to protect what he sees as his no matter the consequences to others.

Perhaps it is because he lets his fears grow and multiply and overwhelm what is good in him. His fear gives him a devious, demonic wisdom. Perhaps it is because the light of the star as interpreted through the magi has no power to bring him true life. He is the polar opposite of the magi, whose wisdom guides them not to destroy, but to follow, discover, and worship with joy.

Why talk about King Herod on Christmas Eve? Because his spirit is alive still in this world, though all his scheming failed to win him the security he sought. Where is this spirit alive? In those individuals and systems that use their political and military power to squash the hopes and dreams of their fellow human beings who want only to live in peace, with enough food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, and security to keep their families healthy, well, and safe, to contribute to the good of all, and to worship as they choose. In those whose ambition is to amass wealth beyond imagining for their own security and

happiness no matter the consequences to people and to the environment. In those of every faith whose religious convictions lead them to try to rid the world of other religious traditions, or of those who think differently about scriptures, theology, and how to daily live their faith in the world.

And his spirit is alive still in us, for we carry the residue of old shame and guilt, anger and resentment, selfishness and self-seeking. We too can be anxious and afraid to the point of losing perspective. We too tend to protect what we have, for losing it is one form of the death we all try to avoid as long as possible.

We talk about Herod on the very eve of Christmas because the Christmas narrative cannot be divorced from its ancient and yet so contemporary political, religious, and social context. We might as well try to separate body from soul, or the sun from its light, a meadow from its flora and fauna, or a city from its inhabitants. Politics and spirituality, church and state, life and death, fear and joy, holiness and its opposite, wealth and poverty - it's all connected, interwoven, inseparable. And God's light, God's wisdom and truth, came into the world, and that light, that life, could not be stopped from appearing; and it permeates all existence.

We do not talk only about the Herod who was, and the spirit of Herod alive today. The spirit of the magi, the wise astrologers from the east, is also alive today. That spirit of sanity, of seeing beyond the surface appearance, of contemplation, of compassion and wisdom, lives today as well. It lives in those who use their power and resources to lift up their fellow human beings, to heal, to feed, to educate, to make peace. It lives in those who refuse to worship the false gods of security, wealth, power, self-advantage, even of beauty itself, and the way things have always been done, but who instead worship the God who is beyond our power to box in and control and fully describe.

That spirit is alive whenever we look our fears in the eye, and refuse to be cowed by them, or impelled by them to take harmful and destructive action. That spirit is alive whenever we overcome our reptilian brain's command to lash out at others out of spite and defensiveness. That spirit is alive whenever we decide to turn our lives around from the ways of destructiveness, or even of boredom, and take steps toward a different kind of life. That spirit is alive whenever we are able to see that which is beautiful and worthwhile, though easily overlooked in the daily bustle of life.

A newly written poem for the season of Advent and Christmas, newly written by a Canadian friend of mine, demonstrates that spirit:

Body psalm for the holidays

Remember each day is a hol(y)day,
a place to recall presence.

No day is more special than the other,
but you can breathe into each day differently.

Remember the simple things - a deep breath into all your cells,
the gorgeous limb of one branch, a place of connection
between a friend or a stranger.

The art of life comes to you everyday, unfolding from its skin
and asks for a greeting.

Welcome the unexpected
and have compassion on the expected.

Live with bold colors from a place of still silence.

Come back to quiet.

May the inside of your body be a Zen garden.

Nap daily, for sleep is the sustenance of surrender.

Remember beauty walks before you, now just walk.

Incremental steps, even backward steps towards wonder.

Know you will not get everything done, said,
written, wrapped, made or thought of.

Celebrate incompleteness and know that can be enough.

It is all about cracks of opening
into heart, body, mind, soul.

Make peace with the cracks and the interruptions,
for they are echoes of the divine.
Greet the ordinary with fresh eyes,
here is the fragrance of a day set apart.
Know you are held in a wider embrace.
Let the natural world hold you and give in to the weather.
Here you are called back to release.
Bare beauty on the back of December
and lend yourself to rest.
Sip small beginnings of calling yourself and
those around you to the juice of joy.
And drink from your own deep well
and spill when necessary.

by Celeste Snowber - December 2008

(Dr. Celeste N. Snowber, Associate Professor, Dance Education/Arts-Based Educational Research, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University. Email: celeste@sfu.ca)

I think that the magi, the wise men, desired the way of wisdom and of God above all else. They looked outside of themselves, and within, with the intention of making the way straight for the Lord, and followed the light they were given. To the devious King Herod, they may have appeared as idealistic, gullible naifs. He decided to use them as pawns in his fear-filled and bloody plot. But they were more knowing than he could imagine. They continued to look outward, and inward, following the light that was given to them as they sought it, and were given the gift of perception through their dreams. Thus they avoided being part of Herod's agenda for them. Off they went on another road, a direction derived from their knowledge of both political realities and spiritual insight.

The spirit of the magi is alive today, when we know where Herod lives in the larger world, and within us; and, knowing that, we dare to seek light anyway, because we know that the spirit of the magi sends us on the way toward the Christ child, the light-filled wisdom of God become flesh.