

Second Sunday after Christmas
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12

- Well, the holiday season is coming to a close. Christmastide is nearing its end.
- The parties are over, visiting family have gone home, and the decorations are beginning to slowly come down. Ornaments are being boxed up and stored away - trees dragged out the door - piles of fallen needles swept up and vacuumed away.
- This week, students and teachers return to their classes
- Parents and adults go back to work - back to the regular work week - back to everyday life
- How will the return be for you?
- Are you looking forward to it? Dreading it?
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- In our readings for today, we hear stories of a long journey - of returning home - and of God's faithfulness
- The First Reading from Jeremiah, speaks to a people who have been away from home for a long time - a people driven into exile and put into bondage - because of their unfaithfulness to the Lord
 - But in today's reading, the Lord shows his faithfulness to his people- and tells them what he will do -
 - He will lead them back, they shall return - to the promised land
 - He will ransom them from captivity and redeem them -
 - He will turn their mourning into joy, He will comfort them and give them gladness for sorrow.
 - The Lord will be their shepherd and he will lead them home.
- And Historically speaking - we know - the Israelites were, in fact, released from their captivity in Babylon, and returned from exile -
 - they were able to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem - the house of the Lord - that had been destroyed -
 - the one the psalmist longs for in today's psalm - how dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord! Happy are they who dwell in your House!
- We also know the good times didn't last - a couple centuries later, Israel was conquered and absorbed into the expanding Hellenistic empire and then, after a brief period of independence following the Maccabean revolt, they were subdued and made a client state of the Romans.

- This was the world Jesus was born into - Israel annexed into the Roman Empire's province of Judea, ruled by the corrupt "puppet" king, Herod, the Romans put in place.
- And so, the people of Israel were, again, expecting God to deliver them. They re-read their ancient prophetic texts as having meaning - not just for events in the past, but for their present day reality. They were looking again for a Messiah, an anointed one, to free them, to lead them out of bondage - and overthrow their oppressors.
- Many, however, were not expecting the way in which God would come to deliver them. - As a vulnerable and defenseless babe, the child of a young carpenter's wife - born into poverty and obscurity, found lying in a manger.
- But Matthew is clear that events in Jesus' life took place specifically to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophets.
- In our passage for today, we hear the chief priests and the scribes of the people tell Herod that according to the prophet - the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem of Judea
- But, for whatever reason, these religious leaders - the most familiar with the prophetic writings - can't seem to recognize or acknowledge that the Lord's promises are being fulfilled in their midst - they don't drop everything to seek out the child in Bethlehem
 - Perhaps because they don't take seriously the astrological interpretations of their foreigner visitors - these so-called "wise men" from the east - who believe a new child has been born who will be king of the Jews.
 - Perhaps they were simply too busy - too burnt out - too indifferent - to take the time to recognize and celebrate something new and amazing taking place
- Herod, on the other hand, at least suspected something - but he feared it - saw the coming of the Messiah as a threat to his own power and position - a rival king - who will upset the status quo - and he'd much rather things stay the way they are
- Ironically, (as Mathew tells it), Gentile outsiders are the first to recognize Jesus' significance- Wise men from the East - pagans - who don't have the scriptural prophecies,- correctly interpret an unusual phenomenon in the sky - a new, and apparently moving star - as a sign announcing the arrival of a child, who has been born "king of the Jews."
- The scripture doesn't really tell us much about the identify of these "Magi" - who they were, what land they came from, or how they learned to interpret the meaning of stars. Even their number is uncertain.
- Traditionally Christians have assumed there were three, because they brought three different gifts - but the text doesn't actually say how many Magi there were.
- I actually think the gifts in the story reveal more about who Jesus is - about his identity and mission - than the gift bearers.
- Each is symbolically related to a dimension of Christ's identity- Gold, symbolizes Christ's identity as the King of Kings- Frankincense - symbolizes his role as our great High Priest - and Myrrh (an ointment used in embalming) points toward what he willingly undergoes for our sake - i.e. death. (His body, when removed from the cross, was wrapped together in linen cloth with a mixture of myrrh and aloes.)

- Most importantly, the magi in the story do something that reveals something very special about who Jesus is- they worship him. The translation we have says they “paid him homage” - but the Greek really means worship. This is significant. Only God is rightfully the recipient of worship - that’s clearly stated in Mathew - but here - the Magi are the first of many different people in the gospel story who worship Jesus (without rebuke) - which is a clear indication of something many Christians now take for granted, the divinity of Christ - that God actually came to be “with us” in Jesus -as a vulnerable and defenseless babe, the child of a young carpenter’s wife - found lying in a manger.
- This certainly was not what people were expecting - but, according to Matthew, this was what God was planning all along, the fulfillment of what the Lord has spoken through the prophets.
- And the Magi being led there, to worship Jesus, foreshadows the great mission to all nations proclaimed at the end of Matthew’s gospel. Here at the beginning, Gentiles were already coming to worship the God of Israel through Jesus Christ.
- St. Paul, writing to the church at Ephesus - the Greek city (in what is now Turkey) - where many, if not most of the church members would have been Gentile - he tells them that:
 - [God] chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.
 - He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,
- This was part of the plan all along - God has wanted to be in relation with you from the beginning - before the foundation of the world - he has chosen to share his divine life with you - to call you his own - his beloved children - and this has been made possible - has happened - through Jesus Christ
- To enter into this relationship - to come to him - to worship him and pay him homage - is to be forever changed -
- Shortly after his conversion to Christianity, TS Eliot composed the poem, “Journey of the Magi” - written in the voice of one of the magi reflecting on his journey:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
 We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.

- The birth of Jesus - Christ's coming into the world - God with us - is a beginning, but it is also an end -
- When the life and light of Christ is born into the world, it means the death of the world, as we know it, the death of our world and our way of being and living.
- It was "bitter agony" for Herod - who wanted to hang on to the old dispensation - to that status quo - to his own position and power - to clutch to himself as a god -
- But the beginning of God incarnate in Bethlehem signals the end of all that
- There is no going back to the way things were - there is no going back the same way
- After their long journey, the Magi - we are told - return to their countries by different way
- Not just that they returned on a different road - but that they came back different from the way they left - they came back changed - bearing witness in their lives to the humble yet transforming reality of Jesus -
- And we are to do the same - to shine as beacons of light - calling attention, not to yourself, but to the joyful reality towards which your life is pointing - to the transforming humility of the manger
- As we return this week - back to work - back to school - back home - to our day to day lives - may we return as faithful witness to Christ, our Lord, allowing his light and love to shine through us to the world - and let us be radiant over the goodness of the Lord. Amen