

## “Peace”

The Rev. Drew Willard  
UCC at The Villages, FL  
December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Advent  
*Peace Sunday*

Matthew 2:1-12

‘Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."’  
Matthew 2:1-2

Let us pray... O God,  
Teach us how we can be open to others who believe differently from us,  
yet remain faithful to who you are and to who we are, ourselves.  
Amen

The Christmas story about the wise men who visit the Baby Jesus  
is an image of interfaith tolerance and cooperation and peace.  
Let me explain how...

The Gospel account from Luke does not say how many ‘wise men’ there are –  
just that they are ‘magi’ from the East, most likely astrologers from Persia  
who would have watched the sky for signs from a ziggurat –  
one of the towers of that region like the Tower of Babel in Genesis.

According to popular tradition, there were *three* wise men,  
who were supposedly from the major religious cultures of that time:  
Melchior, a Persian scholar; Caspar, a Hindu scholar;  
and Balthazar an Arabian scholar.

By the late Middle Ages, European artists were depicting them as kings  
representing the European, Asian, and African races.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi)

However, whether they were astrologers from Persia  
or an interfaith, multicultural mix – or even if they didn’t exist at all,  
and whether it happened or not, the story itself is *a fact*.

That there is such a story –  
and that it would be part of the Christian ‘Christmas tradition’  
as a vision of interfaith tolerance and cooperation and peace, is a fact.  
It is remarkable that Christianity has preserved this vision of  
people from different religious cultures recognizing and respecting  
each other’s religious ‘truth’.

Willard, p.2

These mystic pilgrims returned to their people  
having benefitted from what they saw and learned  
of Jesus born in Bethlehem,  
but who is to say if they became converted to anything other than  
who they already were as Persians or Hindus, Chinese or Ethiopians?  
The image of their harmony is a model for us that is no less *true* than that of  
Pilgrims sitting down together with Indians for turkey dinner  
at the first Thanksgiving – or Thanksgivukkah.  
The vision of interfaith harmony itself is a fact – included in Christian scripture  
and surviving to this day as part of ‘Christmas tradition’.  
This vision of peace is a subtle hope that  
the integration of diverse people of goodwill is possible.

Today, we bear witness to that hope for ‘harmony’ in the midst of our ‘diversity’  
which was the theme of last week’s Tri-County Interfaith Association event.  
This morning, we are participating in a Christian service of worship,  
and because of the flexibility  
in the United Church of Christ’s Protestant-style of liturgy,  
we are able to incorporate the participation of our sister faiths,  
Judaism and Islam.  
Because of their worship traditions, this cannot be easily done in return,  
nor could Catholic and Orthodox Christianity easily do the same.

Perhaps the Christian symbol of the Cross can also be seen as a “Plus Sign”, today,  
between us Christians and our Jewish and Muslim guests.  
This is not to say that we are all the same –  
because Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have their own doctrine,  
or religious “software” about who God is and how best to honor God.  
But God is who God will be, independent of us and of what any of us has to say,  
or of what has been said, or will yet be said.  
However, for people of goodwill, God can be known  
in the handiwork of creation, in the help that comes in the hour of need,  
and in the love we give and receive.

I am grateful for the opportunity we have today  
to explore the possibilities for peace between  
Judaism, Christianity, and Islam  
with such brave and generous colleagues  
as Sheldon Skurow of Temple Shalom and Imam Abdurrahman Sykes.  
I invite you all now to a time of silent reflection about the peace that is possible  
on Earth as it is in Heaven...

Amen

Matthew 2:1-12

[1] Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying,

[2] "Where is he who has been born king of the [Jewish people]?

For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."

[3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

[4] and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the [Messiah] was to be born.

[5] They told him,

"In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet:

[6] `And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will govern my people Israel."

[7] Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly

and ascertained from them what time the star appeared;

[8] and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

"Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

[9] When they had heard the king they went their way;

and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them,  
till it came to rest over the place where the child was.

[10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy;

[11] and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother,  
and they fell down and worshiped him.

Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts,  
gold and frankincense and myrrh.

[12] And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod,  
they departed to their own country by another way.

Inspired by Matthew 2:1-10

**JESUS WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA**

**IN THE DAYS OF HEROD THE TYRANT.**

**NOW LOOK HERE!**

**PILGRIM MYSTICS FROM THE ORIENT CAME TO JERUSALEM, SAYING,**

**“WHERE IS THE ONE BORN KING OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE?”**

**“SINCE WE HAVE SEEN THE STAR OF THIS ONE,**

**WE HAVE COME TO PAY HOMAGE.”**

**BUT, WHEN HEROD HEARD THIS, HE WAS DISTRESSED –**

**AND SO WAS THE REST OF JERUSALEM ALONG WITH HIM!**

**SO, HE GATHERED ALL THE HIGH PRIESTS**

**AND POPULAR RELIGIOUS EXPERTS, TO INQUIRE,**

**“WHERE IS THE MESSIAH TO BE BORN?”**

**AND THEY SAID TO HIM,**

**“IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA,**

**FOR THUS IT WAS WRITTEN BY THE PROPHETS:**

**‘AND YOU, O BETHLEHEM, OF THE LAND OF JUDAH,**

**ARE BY NO MEANS INSIGNIFICANT AMONG**

**THE PRINCIPALITIES OF JUDAH.**

**BECAUSE FROM YOU A PRINCE WILL COME FORTH,**

**WHO WILL WATCH OVER MY PEOPLE, ISRAEL.”**

**THEN, HEROD PRIVATELY CONSULTED THE PILGRIMS TO FIND OUT**

**THE EXACT TIME WHEN THE STAR APPEARED.**

**AND HE SENT THEM TO BETHLEHEM, SAYING,**

**“PROCEED TO SEARCH CAREFULLY FOR THE CHILD**

**AND WHEN YOU HAVE FOUND HIM, SEND WORD TO ME**

**SO THAT I TOO MAY COME AND... WORSHIP HIM.”**

**AND WHEN THE PILGRIMS HEARD THE KING, THEY WENT FORTH...**

**THEN, THEY SAW THE STAR! THEY SAW IT RISE AND GO BEFORE THEM,**

**UNTIL IT STOOD OVER THE PLACE WHERE THE CHILD WAS.**

**NOW WHEN THEY SAW THE STAR,**

**THEY JOYFULLY WENT ONWARD – IN A GREAT HURRY!**

**AND ENTERING THE HOUSE THERE,**

**THE PILGRIMS SAW THE CHILD WITH MARY, HIS MOTHER...**

**AND THEY BOWED DOWN BEFORE THIS LITTLE ONE.**

**THEN UNSEALING THEIR TREASURES, THEY GAVE HIM PRESENTS:**

**GOLDEN ORNAMENTS, AROMATIC RESINS, AND HEALING BALMS.**

**THAT NIGHT, IT WAS REVEALED TO THEM IN A DREAM**

**THEY SHOULD NOT GO BACK TO HEROD.**