

‘Wise Ones Today’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
January 6, 2019 – Epiphany

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

Please pray with me:

God of many races and faces, of the wise and the foolish, gladly we come to your light. We have seen your guiding star come to rest over Bethlehem, where we find your penetrating yet gentle light. Here, in the company of Jesus, our search ends and our journey begins. Amen!

How many of us display a Nativity scene for Christmas? A typical Nativity scene has Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus ... shepherds, maybe some sheep ... a donkey or a cow or maybe a camel ... probably an angel or two ... and, three wise men dressed like kings.

Most Nativity scene I’ve seen show at least one of the kings bowing down to offer their gift to the newborn king. The posture representing humble homage from a human king to a divine king.

These contemporary Nativity scenes mash together the birth narratives found in Luke and Matthew, some images from our favorite Christmas carols and combine them all into one idyllic, demure arrangements of figurines.

The traditional Nativity scene is so idyllic and demure it is hard, if not impossible, to interpret it as a sign of protest and challenge to the status quo.

But that is truly what it is!

Each figurine in the Nativity scene represents a symbol of how God’s truth boldly challenges the human penchant for greed and hubris by giving the greatest position to the poor and lowly.

From shepherds who haven’t had a bath in months ... to a manger stall surrounded by farm animals ... to a young couple too poor to pay for a room in an inn ... God uses these figures to announce the coming of saving grace.

The Nativity scene is a scene of protest that says to the world: Emmanuel doesn’t come to us with a silver spoon in his mouth. Emmanuel doesn’t arrive in a gilded carriage drawn by six white horses. Emmanuel isn’t rich at all ... but a lover of people who live honestly and have nothing to give but their hearts.

The Nativity scene says God loves the poor and lowly ... the hard working and marginalized ... the foreigner and immigrant ... MORE than the rich and powerful.

This remains true today despite our society who readily defers power and privilege to the rich and well off.

The fact that the Nativity scene speaks as boldly today as it did 2000 years ago means Jesus’ birth continues to speak truth to those who abuse power at the expense of those oppressed by power.

Shame is reserved for those who ignore the protest of the Nativity.

Today we focus on the wise men figurines.

These wise men were from “the East” ... an area of the world far, far from Bethlehem.

As mom pointed out yesterday, “East is where the sun rises.”

Psalmists and prophets often state how joy comes with the dawn ... the morning sun ... and wise ones therefore are harbingers of joy.

It’s a great story with a great message of hope for the world. A message we can take to heart as we rise from the manger scene and begin our annual pilgrimage ... our journey to the cross and beyond.

It does make me wonder though. What do wise ones look like today?

Who can envision hope in overwhelming hopelessness? Or search for resolution in times of conflict and division?

Who among us see a distant light and associate it with the hope of salvation?

How many wise ones today can walk as a child of the light amidst the darkness of anxiety and fear?

My prayer is ... **all of us.**

It is us who are the modern day wise ones who have the power to shed light on dark clouds of hopelessness today. When times are scary and chaotic we are the ones to represent peace and hope.

That is our call as we sojourn together following the one who teaches us to walk humbly, be merciful, and love God.

Mr. Rogers was once quoted as saying, “When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

I think about how summers past the Historic Parsells Church hosted weekly cook outs on the front steps of their church. It didn’t take long for the neighborhood to take notice and see the light they offered offset the dark scariness of the street.

THPC were being helpers in a neighborhood praying for more light.

We have witnessed helpers filling the Blessing Box ... many of whom are not even members of this church! The neighborhood has adopted the Blessing Box as a way of being helpers and harbingers of light in the neighborhood.

Helpers are everywhere ... but you do have to look for them.

One of the ways we can help our children to find helpers is to read children’s books. They are wonderful ways images create hope and light in a scary world.

Tomie dePaola, a contemporary artist and children’s story writer, has written countless stories helping children see the world in encouraging ways.

One of his books is called *Three Wise Kings*. dePaola begins the story with three kings ... each from their own land and miles and miles apart from one another ... all see the same bright sky and decide to follow the star. (The wise kings knew a star so bright in the dark sky meant the beginning, or arrival, of something important.)

Along the way, the three wise kings meet up finding common purpose and hope in their journey to find the new wise king.

To me, the symbolism in this story underscores how the three wise men represent the diversity of distance, culture, and race ... that Jesus, the new wise king, embraces.

For Tomie dePaola, the message of the *Three Wise Kings* is a message of hope in a world that doesn't always welcome diversity and acceptance of others on the journey.

Like Mr. Rogers whose wise mother taught him to look for the helpers in times of crisis ... I recommend looking for helpers in the pages of children's stories by authors who craft stories that promote peace and diversity and acceptance and tolerance.

As faithful followers of Jesus, we must overcome how our world today is overwhelmed by violence, animosity, conflict, divisiveness and just plain unfriendliness.

Jesus shines a light on a better way to confront that negative power.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness ... only light can do that."

We begin our annual pilgrimage ... or faith journey into the New Year with a star shining light giving us hope in the world.

Let us enter into the New Year focused on that star as we become the hopeful storytellers of our world.

Thanks be to God! Amen.