

What Do the Nations Desire?

A sermon preached at Georgetown Presbyterian Church by

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted

January 4, 2009

Text: Isaiah 60:1-6

At the end of each old year and at the beginning of each new one, the media tote up all the pluses and minuses of the old year, marking all its significant events. This was a good year to do so. It was a significant year – a hotly contested election, numerous financial scandals and a financial meltdown. A lot of the future will look back to decisions made this year, good and bad.

Now, one can be cynical about these lists. Making them may simply be a way to dispense news during what is usually a slow week, since everybody is out of town. A reporter can write one in late November and then be out of town himself. But even if that is the case, still, I think that making such lists may also be a nearly irresistible urge for all of us. They mark where we have come from and they establish certain milestones by which we can chart our future. They are important in that way. And that is also why we also make lists of significant historical events, encompassing not just a year, but decades and often centuries. Thus, for example, we make lists of history's greatest battles, greatest turning points and the like.

What is sometimes an interesting exercise is to take these historical lists as they were compiled in an earlier era and compare them to our own lists. If we do so, we will see that they have changed. For example, because we have become such a technologically oriented people, recent lists of historical great events tend to list events in the history of technology such as the printing press, landing on the moon, and the birthdays of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. What such lists do not include so much anymore are religious events, although they did in earlier ages. For

example, rarely is the Reformation mentioned anymore as one of history's great events.

That is unfortunate, and it suggests that our hindsight is not, as often claimed, 20/20. For better or for worse, our lives and the lives of the whole world are wrapped up in the outworkings of religious events of thousands of years ago. If Moses had not led the Hebrews out of Egypt, there would have been no holocaust, and there would be no Palestinian/Israeli conflict. There also would have been no Jesus; the entire history of the world would have been different.

Similarly, if there had been no Mohammed quite clearly the present situation of the world would be different, although, as is the case with all these events I have mentioned, we do not know whether it would be better or worse. We do know, though, that it would be very different.

There is therefore little doubt how much religion has changed the world and made it what it is. That we often ignore religion now in marking significant historical events therefore says more about how we are trying to change ourselves and the world around us than anything else. We will be just repeating an attempt made three hundred years ago during the Enlightenment when thinkers also tried to loosen the authority and influence of religion, and chart the human future purely by the exercise of secular reason – an attempt that many historians and philosophers think may have as more to do with our present moral and spiritual confusion than anything else.

At this point in the liturgical year we now celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. It is one of history's most significant events and turning points. That is not entirely obvious to most of us at first, since we tend to think of it simply as the appearance of the three mysterious kings or wise men from the east, bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. Nice, but no big deal. But their appearance is terrifically important for it signifies one of the world's great turning points. It fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah who had claimed over four hundred years before that a light would arise over Israel and that "nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn." In the

appearance of the three kings, God's light and glory was made manifest to the Gentiles, that is to say, it was made manifest to the nations. Why in the first place that is so historically significant is because it is at this point, when the nations confront God's light in the incarnate God, our Lord Jesus Christ, that Christian history begins, a history that has affected the whole world ever since.

But it is also significant at an even deeper spiritual level. Isaiah not only claims that three kings from the orient would come bringing gold, frankincense, and myrrh; Isaiah and, later, Christianity itself would make the claim that the Christ to whom the kings came is himself the very desire of the nations, the fulfillment of all that the nations had wished and hoped for at the very root of their being. In this sense, what made the three kings into wise men was that they were so cutting edge; they had discerned what they really wanted and needed, and what the world wanted and needed. In so discerning, they then came immediately to God's light, which was marked out by the light of that single star in the west. So this event was not just the beginning of a change in the history of the world in the sense that the Jewish and Gentile worlds came together in a way that would change both forever; it was the beginning of God's glory being shed upon the whole world, the extension of God's promises to Israel to the world as a whole.

This is a truly astounding claim, although, perhaps, for fifteen hundred years or so, for the population of Europe, and then the Americas, it could be maintained without straining credulity. The three kings, the three Gentile kings, who came to the manger, grew in time to include all the Gentiles of Europe, for awhile most of those of North Africa, and then those of North and South America. Christian light was also spread to Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Today, however, to claim that Christ is the light of the world and the desire of the nations is to make an astounding claim that seems to fly in the face of the facts. When Christianity now meets Islam, or Judaism, or Hinduism, or even Buddhism, it would seem clear that Christ is *not* what the nations desire.

Even among the so-called wise in Europe and the Americas, it is hardly evident that here is the desire of all those who seek wisdom. Albeit, Christianity is still growing, faster than any other religion, but there is also no doubt that there is also opposition to it, and even among so-called Christian nations, there is a desire to keep it at least at arm's length.

So what do the nations want? Do they really want any one thing? How can we say that what we believe is what they want? How once we have talked to them and taken them seriously can we with any integrity spread the good news of the light that enlightens all people?

There is no easy answer to any of these questions; there certainly is no slogan that sheds so much light on the situation that it will allow one to dispense with thinking long and hard about them. And we certainly cannot simply tell others that they don't know what they want.

But what we can do, and ought to do on this Feast of Epiphany, is to take a closer look at our own history. We ought first of all to realize who exactly we are and how we got to where we are spiritually. We need to realize, first, that *we* come from the nations, the Gentiles. Two thousand years ago, when Christ was born in Bethlehem and was adored by the three kings, most of our ancestors were living somewhere in forests, sacrificing their first born sons to the spirits of trees. That we believe in Christ is therefore not something that we, or at least our ancestors, came by naturally. The promise of God to Israel was not first given to us. It was only at the point of Epiphany that we were grafted onto the vine of Israel.

Now, it is very easy for us to think of ourselves as something like "native Christians," just as most white folks think of themselves as Americans and everybody else who comes to these shores are newcomers who need to learn our ways. We, however, do not inherit the promises of God as Jews do, that is, simply by birth. If John the Baptist once told the Jews that God could create children of Abraham out of the very rocks, it is a lesson that we ought to take to heart

ourselves. Even if our families have been Christians for hundreds, if not a thousand or more years, we need to understand that each of us is a child of Abraham, not by nature, but by grace. Each one of us comes as a foreigner to the promise, and by grace is grafted onto it. That is the importance of baptism. It is not a sign of what we already are, it is literally and for the first time for each one of us, a new beginning.

Once we realize that, then, second, we need to ask ourselves these questions: “Why did we come?” “Why do we come today?” It is, I suppose, easy enough to say that we came simply because we were raised that way. That is an answer that once we apply it across the board is that we use to make ourselves more tolerant. After all, we think, and with good reason, if we had been born in Saudi Arabia we would probably be Muslims. But that is not the answer we need to think about. To answer that way is to suggest that we personally have no good or deep motivating reason for doing what we do religiously. Indeed, it is to suggest the same thing of Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Buddhists. It makes absolute truths that all live by into relative and inconsequential matters. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus don’t think that way; I don’t see why we should.

The point I want us to think about here really is “Why did *we* come here?” We may have been raised in a so-called Christian culture, and even by Christian parents. But why are *you* here this morning? There are a lot of people who are similarly situated in life who are not here, and who, in fact, are rarely or never here. To be here, to have made the effort, requires some deep personal reason and some deeper personal effort. It is not a matter of just cultural and historical values and truths, it is a matter of what we each hold as true and cannot see otherwise, and what we hold as valuable and cannot change without losing our sense of self or of personal moral and spiritual integrity. To do anything else is to indulge in spiritual carelessness.

So why are we here? Undoubtedly, each of us has a very personal spiritual history behind our efforts and dedication, and any number of experiences that may not be the experiences of others, although we may have more in common with them than we sometimes think. Still, despite our differing personal histories, for all of us it surely is because we have followed this light that has come and this glory that has risen upon us and the world. For some that light may have come early and appeared very clearly, and has never left them. For others it may have appeared early and then not been so clear afterwards, yet the experience was such that they felt they had to follow it. Finally, for some there may never have been any clear light at all; the light may simply have always been the hope of light, and that has still kept them pushing forward like the three wise kings through the desert.

Once we realize that about ourselves, let us then, third, ask why are we *here*? Not only because of the light that enlightens everyone; it is also because *here* we are fed by that light. We are *here* because we are fed here by the words of the Word that is the light of the world; it is because we are fed here by this sacrament. It is because in being so fed somehow we are better, and because by being here we can live in hope – hope that life is good, hope that there is goodness, that there is justice, that there is mercy, that there is love that never fails, anywhere.

Now, what does that tell us about what the nations desire? It can at least tell us, who are of the nations, that this is what we desire and this is what is worth desiring above all. Now, that doesn't necessarily tell us why others resist the light, when and if they do, anymore than it tells us why we have resisted the light at times in our own lives. But it does tell us that we live because of light, life, mercy, justice, love and hope that was given to us by God's grace in extending his promises to the whole world. And it does tell us that that is what we have to tell the nations. So let us then tell them just that – no more, no less. Let us tell them of light, life, mercy,

justice, love, and hope that makes life good. And if we do tell them that, and if we ourselves live that way, we can believe that the nations will come just that much closer to what they really desire. For what else could the nations desire other than light, life, mercy, justice, love and hope?