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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
1/2/2011, Epiphany Sunday  
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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,  
<sup>2</sup>“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, RSV)

They are foreigners, maybe Persians, these wise men, neither Jews nor Christians. That is the important thing about them: they are outsiders. They do not know the holy scriptures of Israel. They do not know the sacred stories of Israel. They are simply pursuing truth according to their own lights, their own sense of rationality and logic. They are seekers, studying the heavens, imagining a kind of harmony and unity between the things of earth and the things of heaven such that the appearance of this extraordinary star suggested to them that something extraordinary had happened on earth. They meant to find out. They put their thoughts into action, saddled up their camels, gathered together their gifts, and set off on pilgrimage following this star.

New Testament scholar N.T. Wright reports that in the year 7 B.C. there happened to be a certain configuration of the planets that might have launched the Wise Men on their pilgrimage. The planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times then. Jupiter was thought to be the “royal” or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews. So, the Wise Men put two and two together and concluded that this sudden, brilliant star meant that a new king of the Jews was about to be born.<sup>1</sup> They set off, then, to see this new king.

Their science eventually led them to their Savior. Notice that they had no way of knowing this at the time. They thought they had found an infant king of the Jews – a local king. Little did they know that they had found the newborn King of kings and Lord of lords, the everlasting Lord. They had found their Savior, before whom one day they will gladly bend the knee and acknowledge something that at present they cannot understand: that this infant Jesus is in fact *their* Savior and their Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The high festival of Epiphany celebrates what is called the “third predicate of the church,” that is the church’s “catholicity.” There are four classical predicates of the church. We recite them Sunday by Sunday in the creed: the church is “one,

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, Part I (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2002), page 10.

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2.

holy, catholic, and apostolic.” The church must be true to each one, lest it lose its soul.

Well, the third one is the one Epiphany celebrates. The church is “catholic.” The church is convinced that the birth of Jesus is good news for the whole world. Epiphany is kind-hearted to all humanity. Epiphany says that the church yearns for souls -- all of ‘em! We want no one on this face of this earth to be left lonely or discouraged, not knowing that they have a good Saviour. He is Jesus Christ, whom the Wise Men visited and adored so long ago.

The story of the Wise Men is found in St. Matthew, and in a way, that is odd, for St. Matthew seems especially to be oriented toward *Jewish* Christians. St. Matthew is the evangelist who especially reassures them that Jesus did not come to dishonor Israel’s love of the Lord and of his holy Law. And so, it is in St. Matthew that read Jesus say this about the Law:

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. (Matthew 5:17, RSV)

Also, St. Matthew speaks of the “jot” and the “tittle”:

<sup>18</sup>For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. (Matthew 5:18, KJV)

So St. Matthew wants to reassure his people that the holy Gospel concerning Jesus Christ is coherent with their scriptures and their deepest faith.

Yet it is St. Matthew who also presses the Gospel in favor of the *outsiders*. We see it in this great story of the Wise Men in Chapter Two. But even before this, in Chapter One, St. Matthew enlarges the story of Israel to include *unlikely* people. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba

Ordinary genealogies in ancient times, for example, operate by way of men. Ancestry is traced through men. But St. Matthew traces the genealogy through both men and women. Aye, and he chose some stunning women!

He speaks of four women in the background of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. Each of these women somehow is unusual, likely to be overlooked and forgotten about. But Matthew presents a Jesus who does not forget about people and loves even the lowly. Let me speak briefly about each woman:

- ❖ Tamar played prostitute in order to get impregnated by her father-in-law, Judah. (Genesis 38)
- ❖ Rahab *was* a prostitute. (Joshua 2)
- ❖ Ruth was a woman from Moab. (Ruth 1) In referring to Ruth, St. Matthew is lifting up a heritage that Israel already celebrated: that is, that among the ancestors of mighty King David was a Gentile, Ruth, the Moabitess.

- ❖ And perhaps most striking of all, Matthew includes “Uriah’s wife,” Bathsheba. (2 Samuel 11) The mention of Uriah’s wife could be a painful memory for Israel because that woman was the victim of terrible sins by King David, sins both of lust and of murder.

St. Matthew seems to refer to these stunning women in order to expand Israel’s sense of scope concerning Jesus, and to say that from the beginning, the faith of Israel has embraced outsiders, the suspect, and the lowly.

Indeed, we could argue that the church inherited the third predicate - its catholicity - from Israel.

Go back to the beginning of Israel’s story, for example. Go back to the story of Abraham. The Lord promised Abraham and Sarah not only that they would have a son, but that one day “all the nations of the earth” shall bless themselves “by your descendent.”

<sup>15</sup>And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup>and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup>I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, <sup>18</sup>and by your descendants shall *all the nations of the earth* bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” (Genesis 22:15-18, RSV)

St. Matthew believed that this promise had come true in Jesus: through this particular Israelite all nations shall be blessed.

Likewise, the prophet Isaiah had reaffirmed and rejoiced over the worldwide blessing that Israel was meant to be:

<sup>1</sup>The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and *all the nations* shall flow to it, <sup>3</sup>and many peoples shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. (Isaiah 2:1-3, RSV)

Again, St. Matthew believed that this prophecy reaches its fulfillment in Jesus. And so he has the Wise Men journey to Jesus, a foretaste of “all the nations” coming to him.

Finally, St. Matthew will reaffirm and command the catholic nature of the church in his last chapter, in his last scene, when the ascending Jesus gives his Great Commission to the church:

<sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples *of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, RSV)

As for me... Matthias Peter Bhasin and Evelyn Sturhann (86 years old)

As for me, I like to look at the Wise Men and the catholic nature of the church from the pastoral point of view.

This past week is one of those weeks in which “the Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away.” We will include these things in today’s intercessions.

First, the Lord gave. The Lord gave us a new little one. His name is Matthias Peter Bhasin, the newborn son of Lara and Aakash Bhasin. Carol and I went to see him this past Thursday evening, up at Lawrence Hospital in Bronxville. As I looked at Lara holding little Matthias - the whole family looking so content and happy - I found myself thinking of the good children’s song, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.”

Here lies Matthias so comfortably in Lara’s arms:

He’s got the iddy biddy baby in his hands.  
He’s got the iddy biddy baby in his hands.  
He’s got Matthias Peter Bhasin in his hands.  
He’s got the whole world in his hands.

Meanwhile, here lies Lara, so comfortably in the everlasting arms of Almighty God:

He’s got the whole world in his hands,  
He’s got the whole wide world in his hands.  
He’s got Lara Simone Bhasin in his hands.  
He’s got the whole world in his hands.

And then, yesterday, we got the news that Evelyn Sturhann has passed on into the nearer presence of Christ, at age 86. And I find myself thinking again of the universal nature of our hopes:

He’s got you and me, brother, in his hands.  
He’s got you and me, sister, in his hands.  
He’s got Evelyn Sturhann in his hands.

He's got *the whole world* in his hands.

Epiphany teaches us to think nothing small-minded concerning the birth of Jesus. The Wise Men teach us to imagine nothing small-hearted about the Gospel. When the Christmas angel spoke of a Saviour, the angel put no qualification upon that good pronoun "you":

For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.(Luke 2:11, KJV)

Each of you, saint and sinner alike, take that blessed pronoun to heart and claim it for yourself. And know that this blessed pronoun is meant for far-off people too -- even exotic people from Iran, like the Wise Men of old.

Epiphany means hope for whole world, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.