

# PILGRIM

## CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

### OFFERING GIFTS

Matthew 2: 1-12 January 3, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

During the Roman occupation of Judea, Herod was awarded an honorary title – King. He did much to consolidate Israel – through his friendship with Rome and his magnificent building programs. But he was never popular with the people. They knew he was King because he would do what ever it took to please the Romans. Herod was King at the time of the birth of Jesus. He was always fearful of losing his position and his reign was one of terror to those he thought were his rivals – even his own family. After the incident in the scripture for today, when the wise men did not return to tell him where the child they were seeking was born, Herod ordered all male babies in that region under two years of age to be killed. Herod was not a beloved King.

It is in Herod's time, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, that the wise men from the East came to Jerusalem seeking the one born to be King of the Jews. You can imagine how Herod received this news. Herod was "frightened and all Jerusalem with him." Herod frightened because there might be someone to take his throne. The people frightened because they feared what a frightened Herod would do to the population. So Herod called together all the chief priest and scribes and asked what they knew about this inquiry of these travelers from the East. I don't know how long it took them to find it, but they reported a prophecy from Micah that said a ruler would be born in Bethlehem, in the land of Judah. A remote prophecy from one of the lesser prophets, but it was all Herod needed. He summoned the wise men and found out the exact time the star appeared. That is important because it would tell Herod the exact time the child was born. Herod sent the wise men on their way. "Go, search diligently for the child. When you find him, bring me word that I may also go and pay him homage." The wise men followed the star. It led them to a house in Bethlehem. Entering the house, they found Mary, Joseph and the child. They presented him with gifts – gifts for a King – strange gifts for a child – of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were warned in a dream to take another route home and now go back and report to Herod. It was then that Herod ordered all the male babies, under two years of age in that region, to be killed. Herod wanted no rival to his throne – to his power.

No one knows when the wise men found Jesus. But it is safe to say it is later than the night the shepherds came to the inn and found Jesus in the manger. The text says by the time the wise men found him he was in a house. But today, our children place the wise men in our manger scene – as I think we should. They are a part of the birth story of Jesus. Time is not as important as the story.

There are many questions. How many wise men? Where is this house? Why did Herod choose to kill all the male children under the age of two? What are these strange gifts? But this story of these travelers from the East, following a star, captures our imagination as much as the angels and the heavenly host in announcing the birth of Jesus. "Behold that star up yonder. It is the star of Bethlehem." "There's a Star in the East on Christmas Morn, Rise Up Shepherds and Follow." "Beautiful Star of Bethlehem, Shine On."

Opening their treasure chests they presented him gifts. In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas, with rituals of gift giving tied to these treasure-bearing wise men instead of a jolly fat man in a red suit. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.

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C H U R C H

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Epiphany – a Christian Festival on January 6 celebrating the visit of Magi to the infant Jesus. Epiphany – a sudden insight into the reality of something – usually initiated by some simple, homely or common place occurrence. Are these manifestations just things of the past – always introduced by “once upon a time” or are manifestations of the Divine present with us now. I think our slogan, “God is Still Speaking” calls on us to understand that God comes to us in our own day – through word, people and deed.

This idea of offering gifts has been with us for a long time. It is important for us to find that “right” gift to offer to those we love. To much of the world, Christmas is only about giving gifts. To the Jews, this gift of a child born in Bethlehem would signal an era of one who would bring the Kingdom of Israel back to the prominence of King David. For us Christians, this gift of a child is the one who comes as a son of God, one who would call all to follow in a way of peace, not just for rulers, but for the common people. This Jesus for us is the one in whom God’s Spirit dwelt fully. Jesus represents for us those most important attributes we attribute to God – loving kindness, forgiveness, justice, mercy, and a hope of a better way of living together that will include all, especially the poor, those pushed to the fringe of society. It is the gift of this Christ Child that is offered to us in this New Year. Let us receive Jesus with all the joy the season can bring to us and to those about us.