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1/5/20--University Presbyterian Church
Matthew 2:1-12

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Epiphany is a tale of two cities. I am not referring to the famous novel entitled *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens. Rather, the two cities I am speaking of are found in our biblical passage for today: the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Epiphany, the story of the magi's search for the Christ child, is a tale of two cities and what they each represent. And it is a story that is not only told on the pages of the Bible but one that is told in our lives today.

Let's begin with the issue of who these magi were. The English translation of the passage calls them "wise men." They are often referred to as the three kings. But they were not kings. Most likely, they were Zoroastrian astrologers: men who studied the stars and interpreted meaning from what they saw in the constellations. Here is what the biblical account does *not* tell us about these men, despite what Christian tradition has told us down through the centuries. The Bible does *not* tell us how many magi there were, despite our belief that there were three of them. Could have been two of them, could have been 20 of them! We just don't know. The Bible does not tell us their names or their races or that they traveled with camels. None of those details is found in the biblical account of the magi. What we do know is that they would have been Gentiles, not Jewish men. And so they symbolize Jesus' saving role for all people--not only for his own Jewish community but also for the non-Jewish world. From the Epiphany story we learn that even pagan Gentiles were drawn to Christ.

These star-gazing magi observe a special star in the sky and believe this star heralds the arrival of a new king who will bring peace and prosperity. And so they set out on a journey to find this king. They set their sights on Jerusalem. After all, Jerusalem is the seat of power.

Jerusalem is the big city. Jerusalem is where important people reside. And these magi are also well read and knowledgeable men, so they know the Isaiah passage we read today about Jerusalem becoming a shining light for the world--how nations will stream to it, how foreign travelers will bring items like gold and frankincense. So they come prepared with all the right gifts for this new king. And they journey to the big city of Jerusalem and start asking about where they can find the king of the Jews.

The trouble was, there already was a king in Jerusalem: King Herod. And as we might imagine, this news of another king does not sit very well with him. This news makes him very, very anxious. Those in power don't like threats to their power, and Herod was no different. We are also told that the magi's inquiry about the king of the Jews made all the *rest* of Jerusalem very, very anxious. There is nothing so destabilizing to a country than when it is governed by an insecure leader. We know the truth of that in our own world today! And so everyone in Jerusalem is in a panic. What does this information mean for all them? What will Herod do? And what might the Roman government do if it gets word of a Jewish king? Would there be violence? It is a stressful time in Jerusalem.

Most of us would acknowledge that we live in an anxious age. Anxiety abounds. We are anxious about our personal lives, about our jobs, our success, our finances. We are anxious about our health and our safety. We are anxious for our family members. And we are anxious for the national and global issues that confront us: the political situation in our nation, the global environmental crisis, the threat of terrorism and nuclear weapons. The pace of life, the demands of life, the threats to our lives all make us anxious. Maybe it is helpful to recall that anxiety is not new to our generation. Maybe every age, every time in history is an age of anxiety. We certainly see how anxious the people of Jerusalem when the status quo of power was threatened.

Frightened by what he learns from the magi, Herod summons the leading scholars of his day to tell him where the Messiah was to be born. And these scholars of scripture give him some surprising news. They tell him that the magi roaming around the city have been using the wrong text when they showed up in Jerusalem looking for the king of the Jews. Instead of using Isaiah 60 in searching for the Messiah, the scholars quote Herod a passage from Micah: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people." Bethlehem. The hope of the world is found in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem.

Now Bethlehem is but a mere nine miles from Jerusalem. That's all--just nine miles away. But it might as well be nine light years away, because Bethlehem represents something far, far different than Jerusalem. This Epiphany story is a tale of two holy cities. Jerusalem is the great and prosperous city. It is a city of the urban elite, of rulers, and those holding the reins of power. It is a city that offers a vision of self-sufficiency, of wealth, of weapons. It is a city based upon anxious striving to get ahead and to hold on to what one has. But Bethlehem is a humble town, not much more than a village filled with peasants. With the birth of Christ, Bethlehem offers an alternative vision: of the lamb and lion lying down together, a place where love makes itself vulnerable, and attention is offered to the poor and the least. Bethlehem becomes a symbol of a peace that is found in grace and justice.

Epiphany is a tale of these two cities. And it beckons us to consider to which city we will belong. Will we belong to Jerusalem, and be filled with striving and seeking and anxiety. Will we align ourselves with the place where power is used to achieve what one can for oneself? Will we belong to the place that is ruled by a fear of scarcity, of not having enough, and by fear of losing what we have? Will we belong to the place where life is about what the individual can acquire, can achieve, can claim for him or herself, where we strive for validation in possessions,

success, and wealth? Will we belong to the place that draws narrow circles around who is accepted and who is rejected?

Or, will we belong to Bethlehem? Will we belong to the place that tells us we are wanted and accepted even in our conditions of brokenness and failure? Will we belong to the place that offers vulnerable love, generous amounts of grace and mercy, and a kind of abundance that does not correspond to material possessions? Will we belong to the place that is inclusive of all kinds of people? This is what Bethlehem offers us.

I think that much of the life of faith is lived in a constant tension between these two cities. Geographically, these cities are only nine miles apart, but inside our hearts and minds, they are often much, much closer. And we feel the pull of Jerusalem and Bethlehem living side by side within us. Jerusalem gets all the attention. Jerusalem is filled with all that glitters and attracts us. But as our scripture shows us, Jerusalem is a place filled with so much anxiety. Much of the time, we belong to Jerusalem.

But imagine for a minute, what it would be like in your life to arrive at a place where you no longer had to strive to prove yourself or to achieve to impress others, or where you no longer felt shame or lived with fear. Imagine what it would be like to dwell secure in love, to be at peace in your heart, to know an abundance of wellbeing, *even* as you face life's hardships. Imagine life without anxiety not because there are no problems in your life but because of the love, the grace, the mercy, the acceptance, the hope, the promises found in the king of Bethlehem.

The magi, also known to us as wise men, discovered two kings on their journey: one in Jerusalem, one in Bethlehem. But they knelt down and paid homage to only one of those kings--

the infant king of Bethlehem. And therein lies their true wisdom--because between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, they discerned where the true glory lies.