

“Where Is the Child?”

Matthew 2:2

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

January 6, 2019 (Epiphany Sunday)

In our tradition, this is “Epiphany”—the twelfth of the “twelve days of Christmas”. It is always observed on January 6, which this year happens to fall on Sunday. “Epiphany”, from the Greek, means “manifestation”. On this day, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles—that is, to all nations. Some Christians will celebrate three great epiphanies today: 1) the magi’s adoration of the Christ child; 2) the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River; and 3) Jesus’s first recorded miracle, transforming water into wine. It is the first of the three, magi’s adoration, on which I will focus.

According to the story in the Gospel of Matthew, “Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the East, and we have come to worship him.’”

The ancient text asks: Where is the child? Some might well ask today: Yes! Where is the child?

As you know, during our Advent and Christmas observances, I have tried to help us separate the provable facts of our faith, from the popular myths of our faith. **The integrity of our faith is not diminished, if we understand the difference.**

For example, though the Bible says so, Jesus was probably born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. For example, though the Bible says so, Herod was probably not king when Jesus was born: Herod had died years before. For example, though the Bible says Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit, he may have been conceived as you and I have been. The New Testament scriptures were authored and compiled by a parade of official and unofficial Jesus believers during the early centuries following Jesus’s death.

Embellishment and convenient reconstruction were accepted literary techniques. **The integrity of our faith is not diminished, if we understand the difference between fact and myth.**

So, regarding Epiphany: the “manifestation” of Jesus to the magi:

Passages of prophesy in the Hebrew scripture, Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60, are the basis for the story of the adoration of the magi, which appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. Biblical scholars such as Marcus Borg of Oregon State University, and Teresa Berger of Yale Divinity School agree that “three” was established by Origen, the ancient Egyptian historian, as the number of magi likely because the gifts identified were “three” in number. Stargazers and interpreters of dreams and omens had long been associated with the courts of kings. If these travelers came from the East, they would have been riding horses, not camels. Western Church tradition holds that Melchior was from Persia, Gaspar from India, and Balthasar from Arabia. Given this contextual imagery, the purpose of Matthew’s entire account is to crown the newborn Jesus as the unequaled royal of the Kingdom of God, and to lift him up as the Shining Star of the Universe, as prophesied. **The integrity of our faith is not diminished, if we understand the difference between fact and myth.**

The ancient text asks: Where is the child? Some might well ask today: Yes! Where is the child? That is: Where is Jesus? The Unequaled Royal? The Star of the Universe? The Dispenser of Compassion? The Moral Compass of Creation? That is: Where is the Spirit of God?

Felipe Gomez Alonzo, age 8, and Jakelin Caal, age 7, lost their lives at America’s southern border for lack of timely, critical health care. Where is Jesus? Where is the Dispenser of Compassion? Where is the Spirit of God?

Jazmine Barnes, age 7, lost her life in Texas by a bullet ostensibly fired in a case of mistaken identity. Where is Jesus? Where is the Moral Compass of Creation? Where is the Spirit of God?

So-called "Spartan Training Groups" of volunteer militia are being organized in every state of the Union by so-called "Oath Keepers", for the purpose of combatting with lethal force if necessary those who hold and express opposing views. Where is Jesus? Where is the Unequaled Royal? Where is the Star of the Universe? Where is the Spirit of God?

Alas...it is not the child who fails us. It is we who, at such times, fail the child.

Alas...at other times, by the Grace of God, the child awakes.

On a hilltop overlooking the Puerto Rican city of Cidra, a hurricane victim cannot withhold tears of joyful gratitude for the assistance of volunteers rebuilding his family home. There is Jesus! There is the Dispenser of Compassion! There is the Spirit of God!

In Minnesota, a high school pitcher skips his team's celebration to first hug the batter he struck out to end the game. Though opponents in the championship game, the pitcher and batter are best friends. The pitcher says: "Our friendship is more important!" There is Jesus! There is the Moral Compass of Creation! There is the Spirit of God!

In the United States Capitol, a new session of Congress begins, with more women of more diversity than ever taking the oath of office, by happenstance on the 100th anniversary of women achieving the right to vote in America. There is Jesus! There is the Unequaled Royal! There is the Star of the Universe! There is the Spirit of God!

Alas...it is not the child who fails us. It is we who, at times, fail the child.

Alas...at other times, by the Grace of God, the child awakes.