

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
December 27, 2009
Matthew 2:1-11
Kings and Gifts

Today's Bible story about Jesus' birth is a contrast. In Herod we see a petty tyrant. He was not a real king. He was elected by the Roman senate Rome to rule over the Jews to keep them under control, and he was a ruthless man. He had at least 5, and maybe as many as 10 wives in succession, all to curry political favor. Josephus the historian described him as "a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis." History says he murdered two brother-in-laws, a mother-in-law, a wife and two of his sons. He was also known for his building projects, one of which was the rebuilding of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. It is telling to note that this was known as "Herod's temple"- not the temple of God! Herod was not a man who would welcome Magi telling him about a new born king! It is no wonder that in two weeks our scripture reading will tell us about his order to massacre all the children under two years of age.

Then we have the Magi who come to him seeking the new born king. Note that the scripture never tells us there were three, and it also does not say they were kings. Instead they were sages, wise people, perhaps astronomers/astrologers. We can imagine that they were people who

watched and interpreted the movement of the stars. There were three gifts- gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts represent royalty-gold, divinity-frankincense, and the prophetic, the king, the priest and the prophet. Perhaps that's where the legend of Caspar, Melchior, and Belthasar come from- three gifts, so it was imagined that there were three Magi.

What contrasts- 1. one king who is not really a king but a tyrant, and 3 Magi who follow a star to bring gifts worthy of a king, 2. a king who brings violence even to small children, and a small child who is born Prince of peace, 3. and the city of Jerusalem where Herod the great and the powers that be reside, and the backwater birth town of Jesus the humble, Bethlehem where the true power and gift of God's Love is found.

Yet the focus of this story today is not kings, Magi or the gifts they brought. Instead it is much simpler, yet more profound. Imagine if you will, the situation. A crowded town, a crowded inn, a crowded stable or house- not a house as you and I live in, but one much more like we would find in a peasant town- perhaps using a hollow in the side of a hill, with little wood involved. A new family, far from home, with few resources. Yet I imagine they would be surrounded by people who have come to see the new baby. Joy and relief mingled with confusion, noise and exhaustion. The innkeeper and his family, the people of the village, even the shepherds from their

fields, come to pay their respects to the new family. In every time and place the arrival of a child- whole and healthy, and a healthy mother, are a wonder and a cause for great joy and celebration by a whole village.

And then, a call from outside, or perhaps a small child rushes in. There are more visitors- strange men who have come to see the child. In the times of a tyrant like Herod, fear and trepidation might be a more likely reaction than excitement. Pushing aside the blanket hung to protect the family from cold air and dust, Joseph might have gone to see just who these visitors were. Imagine his surprise! Not soldiers or government representatives who treat him with disdain, but Magi from far away places who greet him with respect and ask permission to pay their respects to his son! And they do. In their strange, exotic, mysterious and mystical ways they enter to visit with wonder and joy on their faces- it matches the wonder and joy on the faces of the parents and the child.

Do you remember when you first visited a new baby? For the mothers here, perhaps you think of the new baby they laid in your arms. For the fathers, perhaps you remember it was your child as you witnessed their birth or saw the child in your wife's arms. For the grandparents, perhaps you think of your first, or second or sixth perfect grandchild. And I

remember my first visit to all my nieces and nephews. What wonder and joy!

And this week, as we celebrated Christmas, how many of you were visited or went visiting? And I imagine, greeting loves ones, there was much wonder and joy. Last Sunday a whole big group of us went caroling to two residential facilities. I cannot tell you how much joy and wonder was created, among those visited, and among the carolers. It truly was a wonderful experience but I was tired when we finished.

How many of you feel like I do this morning, perhaps hoping the sermon goes a little long so you could take a nap with your eyes open, and rest from all your visiting and being visited? We can get exhausted from the fun of being with the people we love and care about, sharing wonder and joy. It struck me that, just like physical exercise can actually give us more energy, perhaps we are exhausted because we aren't exercising the right muscles enough.

Well, I am here to tell you, just as we talked about in the time with the Children and Youth, the meaning of Christmas isn't about kings or gifts. It is about wonder and joy. And we need to start exercising those wonder and joy muscles! Isn't getting more fit on everyone's New Year's resolution list?!

Now you don't need any special shoes or workout clothes. And for anyone concerned, this will be low impact exercise for our knees, backs, and ankles. And it will be great for our hearts! Here is my proposal for our church exercise program for wonder and joy, and you are all invited!

This Monday we will be exercising our wonder and joy handshaking muscles by taking all the food we have collected and visiting with folks at the Interfaith Food Pantry. Wednesday we will be exercising our wonder and joy listening and chatting muscles from 3:00 to 4:00 by visiting with the children and folks at the Soup Hour at St. Matthias. Next Sunday after church we will be exercising our wonder and joy hugging muscles by visiting with the folks at the LaHabra Residential facility. Then the next week we will exercise our wonder and joy smiling muscles by visiting with some of our folks who cannot get to church.

Now each week, we will change the times to suit everyone's different schedules, and to make sure we exercise all our wonder and joy muscle groups. In case you're worried, there will be no membership dues or class fees, this exercise program is free. You will notice that it is just a three day a week program. But by next Christmas, we will all be so fit, we will not get exhausted by wonder and joy.

Then in 2011 we can step it up and do a whole wonder and joy
marathon! Amen.