

JANUARY 9 2011

SCRIPTURE:

Isaiah 60:1-6

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

SEEKING “SOMETHING”

There is no doubt that we have been on a journey. The Christmas journey is a journey of seeking the joy of the birth of our Saviour. Christmas seems to be that season when, even if just for a short time, we put aside all our own or the world’s “troubles” and almost “pretend” for awhile that we have that hope, peace, joy and love of Christmas Advent. I think it is even more than “pretending” because for a short time we really do believe, again if only fleetingly, that we CAN achieve this joy and further more we can achieve this path of following our Messiah. We briefly REALLY BELIEVE that if follow, our world can be transformed. Then BAM, it is over. And slowly and painfully we enter into this post Christmas time when we feel the slipping away of our optimism and the REAL world starts to close in again. Don’t you hate that? Don’t you wish that we could HOLD ON and let Christmas continue? I do! So, what to do, what should we be seeking now? What “something” will help us to keep on this path of joy and optimism.

The scripture this morning seems at first to be of little help for us in this seeking. I hate that too! Why couldn’t Matthew give us a break for just a little longer? But NO, we are immediately, following joyful Christmas, confronted with Epiphany and this story of the Holy Family that is full of intrigue and deception and fleeing from danger. Oh no doubt when we connect it to the Christmas story as we often do, we focus on the “nice” part of the story. The part about “rich and important guys” bringing expensive gifts and worshipping on their knees at the manger. That’s the part that we love! BUT Matthew is relentless in forcing us to go deeper into the story and be confronted by all that other “stuff” that makes us so uncomfortable.

First of all the Hebrew scripture, reminds us that “the people” are walking in “darkness”. The world is trapped in this darkness and the answer to this is the coming of the light. The prophecy tells that a “light” will come into the world, and everything will be transformed. Prosperity will abound, there will be an abundance of “good things” – happy children, many expensive animals, such as camels, which equates to prosperity. All will be good. Then Paul assures us that this gift of light is for EVERYONE. No one needs to be left out, and particularly Paul is making it clear to the Jewish population that have accepted Jesus as Messiah, that this gift of light, is not just for them BUT in fact for ALL. Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free, this gift of light is for everyone. So far, so good, the scripture seems pretty positive. Then Matthew brings us back to the darkness!

Actually the gospel starts in darkness if we don’t skip over it. Here come the Wise Men to ask Herod, the corrupt and dangerously evil King of the Jews, where they might find

this new born King who has been promised. And Herod true to his deceptive ways makes out as if he too wants to find this child so he too can worship him. Maybe the wise men were fooled or maybe they weren't. Surely they had heard about this ruler Herod, who was notorious for his absolute tyranny. He was so paranoid that before the end of his rule, he actually killed three of his own sons, because they threatened his absolute power. A point here is that there is actually no real historical evidence that Herod ordered the death of all the little boys, but there is evidence that he was a very violent and self absorbed human being. Historically it is known that he was so intend that the whole world would mourn his death, that he ordered that upon his death all political prisoners would be killed along with one member of every prominent family, thereby assuring that the country would truly be in mourning. This was one nasty human being!

So we have this first glimpse of darkness, and then we have the part of the story that we love. The wise men setting out and finding the baby, opening up their treasures for him and then "being warned in a dream" returning home by a different way.

Matthew of all the gospel writers puts the most emphasis on connecting the story of the birth of Christ back to the stories of the Hebrew Scripture. Joseph in the New Testament is connected to the Joseph of the old. Young Joseph saves the life of Mary and presumably Jesus by following the instruction in a dream. The old Joseph is carried off to Egypt which ultimately is the place of salvation for his family as it is for the family of Jesus. The old Joseph is saved from prison because of his ability to interpret dreams for the ruler of Egypt. Dreams tie the two Joseph's together. Matthew takes it even further, by making a link to the Pharaoh of Egypt and this ruler Herod. Both, evil and corrupt and actually weak men, undertake to get rid of their fear of a new ruler by ordering the death of all boys under the age of two. And ultimately by the power of God, both the Holy Family and the Israelites are brought out of Egypt by miraculous events. Moses and Jesus are linked. Matthew has accomplished his purpose in tying the stories together with a message that spans all that time. And I think that brings us to awareness that we too are tied to the stories.

Matthew does not let us hang on to the joy of Christmas but rather moves us quickly into Self reflection. Each one of us is called to consider what part of our world is dominated by a Herod, and even more so what part of us, our own beings, can quickly slip into the places where the Herod's live in our own beings. We know how the story unfolds for us because as we look back we have the teaching of Jesus to guide us. Jesus came to bring light and love to the world. He came to not only love us but to challenge us to put a stop to the Herods that have always been a part of human history. Whether that is within us or outside of us, Jesus calls us to be aware and to work toward freedom and liberation for those who are oppressed. It is no accident that these stories involve children, because if human beings are going to respond in their best way, it surely is true most humans can not justify to themselves the harming of children. We are touched in a special way by the responsibility that we have to liberate children from any manner of oppression. We are called to listen to the needs of the children and then to respond. To work toward the right way of forming our world so that we all and especially the children are free and safe.

Matthew is asking us to consider what it is that we need to be liberated from. What is it that we need to do to become all that God would have us be? It would be nice of course to stay in the lovely part of Christmas, but that is not reality. We move on to the beginning of a new year and hopefully to the first steps of being all that we can be. Matthew reminds us that in human life we are always holding in tandem both the joy and challenge of life. Joy does not last forever; there is always the pain of human life to contend with. Whether that pain is personal or corporate it is always with us. And the REAL JOY is in our recognizing that we can carry both because we are not alone. We have each other and more than that we have God with us. We have the Good News and because of that we CAN walk out of the darkness.

If you have been watching the news since yesterday, you will know of the latest catastrophic event in the United States. Six people lost their lives in a shooting at a Safeway Store where one of the members of Congress was having a "meet and greet". The Congresswoman was the target of what appears to be a deranged person going on a rampage. The Congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords has so far survived but amongst the dead is a nine year old little girl. The country is devastated as are the families. As I watched the coverage yesterday, I became aware of a reoccurring theme in what most of those interviewed said. Both political leaders and folks who had observed the disaster were asking for the country to pray and also pleading for them to stay "together". The president of the United States said; "In times of crises we Americans come together." This seems to me to be what we are talking about. In times of trouble, in times when our lives become "tangled" as the children showed us, it is most important to stay together, to hold on tight to each other and to pray for God's help and guidance. This is how we can dispel the darkness. God calls us to this task. Matthew teaches us this in the lessons of old. Together with God's help we can transform each other and the world. We can do no less, with God's help. May it be so!
AMEN