

Twelfth Night
Matthew 2:1-12

Most here are familiar with the Twelve Days of Christmas but you might not be as familiar with a festival known as Twelfth Night. Since the mid first century the days between Christmas and Epiphany have been celebrated as a season of merry making and feasting. Even here in America schools have traditionally been out and families have celebrated together. Historically Christmas Day has been counted as the first day of Christmas making January 5th the twelfth day. It is actually where the idea of the twelve days of Christmas came from and at one time presents were given out on each of the twelve days. For many years days and nights were counted separately and the important night was the night before the celebration. Think about Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve. Well there is also Epiphany Eve - the Twelfth Night. And today is the Twelfth Night this year. Tomorrow is Epiphany.

A popular Twelfth Night tradition was to have a bean and pea hidden inside a Twelfth-night cake. Some people call it the King's cake. The excitement lay around the fact that the man who found the bean in his slice of cake became King for the night while the lady who found a pea in her slice of cake became Queen for the night. This tradition went along with the common theme of the celebration where the normal order of things were reversed with masters serving the servants. As a matter of fact in some places this happened throughout the twelve days of Christmas.

I began to reflect on this tradition as I read the familiar story of the Wise Men's visit to the baby Jesus. We so meld this story with the Shepherd's and Angel's story that I think we miss how amazing this account is. For the tradition of the time was for the people to offer gifts to the kings - not the other way around. Even here when the Wise Men came to Jerusalem the first place they went was

to the ruler - King Herod - for that was proper protocol. That was where they expected to find the King of the Jews. They announced their purpose asking *“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”* Their whole journey was focused on giving honor and respect to a new king.

But where was this new king? And who was he? Their visit threw Herod into a tailspin for this was all news to him and if this was true his reign was threatened. He sent for the chief priests and the scribes to find out what they knew about a child to be born - he must have heard some rumors of a Messiah to come. He needed to know where and when this child had been born. The chief priests and scribes provided the where through the words of prophecy - Bethlehem. But when had the child been born? How old would this child be? Herod needed the Wise Men's help to figure this out. So he called them back in to see what they knew. Then he sent them off to Bethlehem with instructions to return with the information of where they found him. So far everything that happened was as one would expect. But what happened next was anything but the normal way of things.

The wise men were led by a star to the house where the child was. Here, not in the palace in Jerusalem, but in the little town of Bethlehem they knelt down and paid homage to a child. They brought out gifts - fine gifts - gold, frankincense and myrrh. Where had these gifts been when they had been before Herod? Well hidden no doubt for they had not offered them to King Herod. No, they had saved them and now they offered these gifts to a child held in his mother's arms - to one who had not yet proven himself. To one no one knew and yet it was this child that they had traveled so far to see. It was this child - not King Herod - who was worthy of gifts and adoration. It was this child that had the power to turn the world upside down - to forever change the normal order of things. That was the Wise men's epiphany - they had found the one who was worthy of their honor and respect and no one else deserved that kind of attention. As a matter of fact they were warned in a dream not to

return to Herod - not to give him any more attention - but to return home by another road. God led them in a new and different direction.

Beatrice Stevenson describes a Christmas she spent with her husband, Dr. Theodore Stevenson, in the mission hospital in western India. Dr. Stevenson was a visiting surgeon at the Miraj Medical Center. Far from home and her children, Mrs. Stevenson became a patient herself in the Miraj hospital. The hot, dirty, smelly city made her depressed and homesick, and she felt she could never celebrate Christmas in such an alien place. The Christmas Eve festivities at the mission hospital, however, changed her understanding of God's transforming grace.

The Christian staff presented a lovely pageant, complete with live animals and even a real baby borrowed from an Indian mother in the maternity ward. The crowd of townspeople followed the proceedings with interest. After the usual cast of characters had gathered around the manger, and the choir sang a carol, a young woman wearing a white sari and a nurse's cap stepped onto the stage and knelt before the manger. The nurse told the audience how she enjoyed serving the Lord as a Christian nurse. She was followed by an Indian workman carrying a hoe, one of the maintenance staff, who mounted the platform. This man knelt before the manger, then announced to the startled audience that he had once had leprosy and had been doomed to a life of begging. He continued, telling how the caring Christian medical staff had treated his disease and performed surgery on his once useless hands.

Finally, a third person stepped up. Everyone recognized that it was a surgeon, Dr. Chopade, wearing operating room attire. The surgeon bowed low before the manger, and then, rising to his feet, the man quietly stated that no one present knew that he had been born an "untouchable" a member of the lowest social and religious caste of that Hindu culture. A murmur of disapproval rumbled through the audience; untouchables were not supposed to become surgeons!

Dr. Chopade then described his wretched boyhood, in which he and his family were segregated

from the rest of the village. His widowed mother cleaned latrines to support the family, and young Chopade searched the garbage heaps for food. He told how he was prohibited from attending the village school or even using the village well. Some angry voices in the audience shouted that he had only experienced what he deserved as an untouchable.

The surgeon quietly continued, telling about his eventual encounter with a kind mission doctor, who had inspired Chopade to become a doctor himself. Dr. Chopade's journey into medicine demanded years of tremendous toil and study, but with the help of missionaries, he finally graduated from college and medical school. He told in simple language that he felt he wanted to serve the Lord and His people, and he became a Christian and a surgeon at Miraj. Gazing out on the now silent audience, Dr. Chopade stood immobile for a time. Then, putting his palms together in the traditional Indian greeting, this noted Indian surgeon from the untouchables turned again to the manger. Bowing his head, he murmured, "Thank you, thank you, Lord Jesus." (Adapted from Beatrice S. Stevenson, "Christmas Eve at Miraj," in PRESBYTERIAN SURVEY, December 1992 by Dr. William P. Barker, TARBELL'S TEACHER'S GUIDE, (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Church Ministries, 1994), retrieved from <https://sermons.com/sermon/a-misplaced-holy-day/1347449>.)

My friends, on this twelfth night may we too bow before the Christ child and say "Thank you Jesus" for the blessings of our lives. For we are who we are today because we have seen the Christ Child and taken a different way home.