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S.010619 Arcola Presbyterian Church, Arcola "Thank you for the Gift to the World" texts: Gospel Matthew 2:1-12, Epiphany Sunday and Ps. 100 (daily prayer scripture)

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon:

We are still in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is when we hear the story of the magi who come from the East to worship the birth of a king, Jesus of Nazareth. I was privileged to share this message with Arcola on Epiphany Sunday. Yet the entire Epiphany Season is the perfect time to learn about our Presbyterian friends in the East.. Epiphany means "a manifestation of a divine being." (Miriam Webster) The king the Magi had seen foretold in the stars was no earthly king. The Magi brought this royal child gifts befitting both a divine and a mortal being: gold for royalty, frankincense for divinity and myrrh for mortality. (Origen) Jesus was God made flesh. For the gospel writer Matthew, the magi and their gifts symbolically point us to an important event that happens at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus' final command to his disciples. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples to "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." (Matthew 28:19) Jesus whose authority was greater than any earthly king came not only as a shepherd to Israel but for the entire world. And, it is through Jesus' disciples that God's promise to be a gift to the whole world will be accomplished. As I experienced on our exploratory trip to the Presbyterian Education Board in Lahore, Pakistan, the world, not just United States, shares God's gift in Jesus Christ. (PICTURE OF PAKISTAN)

The Christian church has taken this command to be shepherd to the world very seriously. Missionaries even went back East from where the Magi came. Jesus' disciple Doubting Thomas is rumored in 52AD to have gone to India to spread the good news to the East. Unfortunately, he was martyred in a cave. (<https://www.pitara.com/science-for-kids/5ws-and-h/how-did-christianity-come-to-india/>) Other missionaries followed Thomas to India. Back in 1830's, Presbyterian missionaries went to what is now Pakistan. And despite struggle and even death, they were successful in laying down educational systems supported by congregations. (<http://www.phcmontreat.org/bios/Bios-Missionaries-India.htm>)

Lahore, Pakistan where we travelled has many colleges and universities. Education is valued there. We Presbyterians believe when you educate someone to read, they can read the Bible for themselves. Our missionaries went to preach and teach not just baptize. The Bible teaches us that God created the world and all that is in it. When you educate someone to think critically about the world in which they live and about which God

created, they can make their own mind up about what to believe about God and about God's son Jesus. Presbyterians believe that God is the one doing the work of saving not us. We are freed up to teach how to be educated not what to know. The side benefits to becoming educated with critical thinking skills are enormous because things like scientific study, and history, and mathematics, and reading skills also help develop societies. Some people do become believers and, as we saw with the work of the missionaries, Christian communities grow up in order to love each other and to worship God through Jesus Christ. They create towns like Martinpur (Sangla Hill, Lahore...) in Pakistan. They make a life for themselves together, sharing what they have with each other as Christians do and become a witness to others about what love really is all about. (ideas from Stuart Baskin's sermon in Martinpur, Nov. 11, 2018)

At the time the Presbyterians arrived in the 1830's, Pakistan was still India and the Sikhs were ruling the Punjab region. The political upheaval during the next 100 years was significant. I am not an historian so very simply it goes like this: The British took over India. Then India took over the Punjab region (what is now Pakistan) from the British. Then Pakistan split off from India. And, Bangladesh split from Pakistan. And, India and Pakistan are still fighting over Kashmir. Several missionaries died during the wars. And as usually during times of upheaval, the most vulnerable people suffered. The Christians did a lot of caring. They cared through schools and hospitals and churches.

Pakistan did not become a country until 1947 and is now primarily an Islamic nation that is tolerant of four primary religions which have been part of its history in the Punjab region: animism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam. In 1972 the government took away all privately funded schools from the Presbyterians. However, Presbyterians don't give up their mission very easily. In 1998, after years in court battles over the land that the missionaries had legally bought, the government turned all but three schools back to the Presbyterians and the Presbyterian Education Board in Pakistan began rebuilding the schools. 2018 was the 20th anniversary of this momentous event. Many of the early Christian believers in Pakistan were the poorest of the poor in the Punjab region: the farmers and the helpers. But, once they received an education, they could become nurses and doctors and traffic managers and city planners.

When I moved to Champaign, I learned that there was a group of people at First Presbyterian Church who were praying for Pakistan. They were learning about the culture with people from Pakistan and others who were Muslim. Some of them (Don K, Neelma, Omer's wife) had even been to Pakistan to see the schools. They met every week and studied a book together and ate snacks together. I decided to meet with them. There was an upfront understanding that this group was not about changing people's religion, it was just about building relationships with each other. I learned that this group especially supported women getting an education in Pakistan. Women who are educated have a positive impact on a community because they can share their education with their children and community.

(PICTURE OF SH Line balloon) First Presbyterian gave scholarships to girls to go to a PEB school called Sangla Hill which Presbyterian missionaries started back in the 1800's. They even helped build a portion of that school. I learned about the 20th anniversary of the Presbyterian Education Board in Pakistan and met the director Veda Javaid Gill who came to our church from Pakistan and told us about how her mother was one of the poorest of the poor who received scholarship to attend, and how she herself got an education at a PEB school. She told us about the courage she had to have as executive director to stand up to people who were opposed to giving the schools back to the Presbyterians. She told us about raising the standards of education in the schools and improving the educational outcomes since the Presbyterians took over the governance again. The schools are attended by Muslim and Christian students and they learn tolerance and love for each other in addition to their studies. A group of four of us agreed to go on an exploration of the schools in Pakistan celebrating this 20th anniversary of PEB Schools returned to PEB from the government. We joined 20 other people in the United States with the Friends of PEB November 10-19th and went to Pakistan to see for ourselves.

The rest that I have to tell you is about my being overwhelmed with joy not fear and about hospitality shown to me not animosity and about thanksgiving not apathy.

Ten days before we left for Lahore, we learned that Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had been wrongly sentenced to death in 2010 on Blasphemy Charges, and although innocent had spent the last 8 years in prison, had been acquitted by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. There were riots and threats of shut downs and traffic jams. Needless to say, I was a little afraid to be going to Pakistan! Yet, for the first time in history the Prime Minister of Pakistan spoke in favor of the verdict given by the Supreme Court! By the time we were ready to leave for Pakistan, our friends in Pakistan assured us that the area in Lahore where we would be was peaceful. When we arrived, we found this to be true. And, we discovered from the Christians that Asia Bibi and her family were safe and out of the country.

(PICTURE OF WORSHIPPERS) The next day, we celebrated the 150th anniversary celebration of Christians in Martinpur. We also attended the dedication of the new Martinpur boys school building. The whole town came out and we were paraded into town on top of oxcarts. Children lined the streets on either side leading to the church and school. Other children danced special dances with pom-poms and colorful costumes. We were showered with rose petals and given leis and scarves to wear. Hundreds of people covered their heads and took off their shoes as we packed into the sanctuary to hear a variety of preachers and important people sing praises and hear God's word preached. The school children lined the balcony windows taking turns at peeking at us Americans sitting in the chancel area in important person seats! There was no fear here only joy! There was Joy for their history. There was joy for their future and joy at being able to meet one another as if we were long lost cousins reuniting for the first time in decades. Blessed be the tie that binds across culture and across continents!!

The welcome we received in Martinpur was repeated each day as we visited different schools and colleges. They had been preparing numerous skits and dramas, songs and dances to show us. We were showered with gifts and praises each place. Although we had armed guards every time we left the PEB compound, we did not need to worry. I think the stones would have risen up to fight for us if we had had any trouble. The people were so happy to see us! We were welcomed at an Interfaith gathering in which the minister of education of Pakistan, a government official, spoke. We were welcomed at Forman Christian College, named after the missionary Charles William Forman who went to Pakistan in 1847, two of his grandchildren were with us, and started the Bang Mahal School, the first English-speaking school in north India which later became Forman Christian College. We were welcomed at Kinnaird Academy, an elementary school. We were welcomed at Sangla Hill. We were welcomed at Kinnaird Women's College. Our friends were welcomed at Pashur Academy and Sargodha school. We were given tea by a rug buyer for 10,000 Villages, a fair trade company, who showed us his warehouse and talked about the hundred families he works with who weave the rugs. We were even welcomed by the people of Lahore when we toured the market, the Old Fort in Lahore and the Indian border. "We are not happy with your government," different people we met said, "but we like you." Hospitality shone like the Bethlehem star in the night sky. It focused my attention where it needed to be, not on the media reports of protestors, or on an isolated terrorist attack that could have happened even in our own country. I focused on the rows of balloons and the shining faces and smiles of the children. Girls were happy and self-confident as they reported on their science projects. I focused on the colors and designs and artistic beauty in the gifted craftsmanship on the tapestries and architecture I saw. As if a dream from the most high God had reached me, I chose a different way to go home – the way illuminated by love and hospitality.

(PICTURE OF SH GIRLS) My visit to Pakistan showed me that I had a lot to thank God for. I am thankful for water that flows freely and is uncontaminated, which they do not have. I am thankful for clean air, which they do not have. I am thankful for tea every afternoon at three. I am thankful for spices like cardamom which they use in everything! I am thankful for the rich variety of food their spices enliven. I am thankful for gardens and flowers and colorful clothing. I am thankful for peace after years and years of war. I am thankful for children who are eager to learn and who understand even in kindergarten what a privilege education is. I am thankful for their creative minds that ask profound questions like "how can we conserve water and recycle paper?" and "what is your life's purpose?" which they asked us one day as we visited their classroom. I am thankful for the missionaries who went to India so long ago who were motivated at the cost of their own lives to share the Word of God with people they did not even know, whose culture was very different than theirs. The missionaries made mistakes in their zeal, to be sure, but they were trying to share a gift, the gift of God's love, and for that I am thankful. Christians make up 1.6% of the Pakistani population, just a little more than Hindus. Like family needs to gather together once in a

while to rekindle relationships and strengthen their identity, so we need to visit one another in our different countries. I needed to go there and they need to come here! Even though people in other cultures like Pakistan may have heard about Jesus from missionaries or media; they may not meet Christ until they meet you or me or another friend who can love their stereotypes of culture away. The love of God needs to be shared and used and experienced just like we are doing today as we sing our songs and pray our prayers and feast together as one body, the body of Christ.

Let the Star of Bethlehem guide you in all your encounters with the Christ Child this coming year!

Notes:

(I wrote Prayer of confession: Glorious Light, you pierced the darkness of greed and oppression when you entered our lives as one of us and loved us. Though power in the world despised you, you continued to love us anyway. This is your way. Your path is lit yet we continue to live as though we were in darkness. Forgive us. Turn us around. Let your light guide us as it did the wise men to a place of humility, generosity, wisdom, and love. In Christ's name we pray.)

(<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm>)

From Origen/Contra Celsum, Book 1, Chapter 60

To the Greeks, then, I have to say that the [Magi](#), being on familiar terms with [evil spirits](#), and invoking them for such purposes as their [knowledge](#) and wishes extend to, bring about such results only as do not appear to exceed the superhuman power and strength of the [evil spirits](#), and of the spells which invoke them, to accomplish; but should some greater manifestation of divinity be made, then the powers of the [evil spirits](#) are overthrown, being unable to resist the light of divinity. It is probable, therefore, that since at the birth of Jesus a multitude of the heavenly host, as Luke records, and as I [believe](#), praised [God](#), saying, Glory to [God](#) in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men, the [evil spirits](#) on that account became feeble, and lost their strength, the falsity of their sorcery being manifested, and their power being broken; this overthrow being brought about not only by the [angels](#) having visited the terrestrial regions on account of the birth of [Jesus](#), but also by the power of Jesus Himself, and His innate divinity. The [Magi](#), accordingly, wishing to produce the customary results, which formerly they used to perform by means of certain spells and sorceries, sought to [know](#) the reason of their failure, conjecturing the [cause](#) to be a great one; and beholding a divine sign in the heaven, they desired to learn its signification. I am therefore of opinion that, possessing as they did the prophecies of Balaam, which [Moses](#) also records, inasmuch as Balaam was celebrated for such predictions, and finding among them the [prophecy](#) about the star, and the words, I shall show him to him, but not now; I deem him [happy](#), although he will not be near, they conjectured that the man whose appearance had been foretold along with that of the star, had actually come into the world; and having predetermined that he was superior in power to all [demons](#), and to all common appearances and powers, they resolved to offer him homage. They came, accordingly, to [Judea](#), persuaded that some king had been born; but not [knowing](#) over what kingdom he was to reign, and being [ignorant](#) also of the place of his birth, bringing gifts, which they offered to him as one whose nature partook, if I may so speak, both of [God](#) and of a mortal man — gold, viz., as to a king; myrrh, as to one who was mortal; and [incense](#), as to a [God](#); and they brought these offerings after they had learned the place of His birth. But since He was a [God](#), the Saviour of the [human race](#), raised far above all those [angels](#) which minister to [men](#), an [angel](#) rewarded the [piety](#) of the [Magi](#) for their worship of Him, by making [known](#) to them that they were not to go back to [Herod](#), but to return to their own homes by another way.