

Jan 6, 2018, Anthon UMC, Matt 2.1-12, "The Twelfth Day of Christmas"

By Pastor Sheryl K Ashley

OK, how many of you have your Christmas tree down? How many will admit to it still being up? Well, it's only the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas today so don't get in a such a rush! Remember our meaningful song the youth taught us in their Christmas program this year beginning, "On the 1st day of Christmas, my true love gave to me", listing all sorts of things, ending each verse up to 12 with the repeated words, "and a partridge in a pear tree." Here we are this day, just ending our song on the 12th day of Christmas, a song about all sorts of gifts from a true love, gifts full of double meanings...such as the "4 calling birds" code for the 4 gospels or the "10 Lords leaping" code for the 10 commandments, etc. It's all code!

As a review of the reason for this song, Legend has it that Catholic Christians in England sang this song as a Christmas carol to disguise their true gifts from God, their True Love, to disguise them from those who would persecute them for openly being practicing Catholics. It was illegal at that time to be a Catholic in England, so they went into using code words to speak their faith and to teach their children the basics of God's gifts, since they couldn't have Sunday School or Catechism without dire punishment.

What would we be willing to do to secretly pass on the truth about God if teaching them were forbidden us? Would we sing it to them in code?

If you didn't pick up on it the first time through, back in December, the double meaning for a "Partridge in a Pear Tree" was that Partridge was a code name for "Jesus Christ" himself. To break a code, you have to know the secret meanings. The reason to encode "Jesus" with the word "Partridge" makes perfect sense once you know why it was chosen. The partridge is a non-flying ground bird, but it would sacrifice itself and fly into a tree to attract the danger away from whatever was trying to capture the little partridges in its care, so they could go free. In Christian reality, Christ's purpose was to come to embrace the cross, sacrificing himself on the tree of Calvary, drawing all evil into himself and taking the punishment our sin, gaining freedom for his little ones. "Little ones" are we who follow Him, that we might go free of the danger of sin. Such sin would destroy us, but even when the darkness of the cross came upon Jesus, it was only for a little while and then we saw his light prevail. That light is shining for us still, showing us to safety.

On this the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, we are reminded our True Love, God, gave to us the gift of His precious Son, Jesus Christ. God's perfect gift did go not under the tree, but gladly went to the cruel tree of the cross in our

place. Perhaps that is why Christmas trees in many churches are still proudly showing their decorations and are in no rush to take them down until after Epiphany Sunday, on this 12<sup>th</sup> day. Some churches even leave them up until Feb. I'm thinking with any help we won't. Perhaps that is why, after many churches do take down the decorations, they remove off all branches but two of the side branches of their tree, and use it as their Lenten cross, signaling that the reason Jesus came at Christmas was the cross. (This is of course is possible only if you have a real tree). Penny might not appreciate us chopping away on the new pencil trees.

I am intrigued looking into the deeper meanings of signs and stories God gives us for they are plentiful. Such as in there being Gentles who could read signs in the stars and who believed the prophetic stories of a king being born into the Jewish race. These wise men believed in the signs and they traveled a long distance to find out what mystery God was doing. The mystery was that God was including the Gentiles into God's welcome which was a great epiphany, shining God's light on a godly truth that we foreigners are insiders too, unlike the Anglicans not accepting the Catholics as God's people in England back in the 1600s. The wise men following a star were a sign that God was including outsiders and that through Jesus we could all be grafted onto the Jewish tree as not only adopted, but blood

bought, children of God. What an eye opening epiphany! God really does so love the world, every bit of the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believed in him would not perish but have everlasting life.” And God sent Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes, to go from the manger to the tree to make a way for us, red and yellow, black, brown and white, from every nation under heaven, for all to freely enter heaven. Every sign from God, from Genesis on points to this truth!

You may not know this but up until even the 19<sup>th</sup> century in some places, January 6 was as big or bigger a celebration as Christmas day for it revealed the epiphany or manifestation of God coming in the flesh to include everyone...everyone at all who would believe and come. **The good news is that Jesus cares!** Jesus cares about people whom everyone else just writes off. Jesus cares about people whom others consider to be the scum of the earth. Jesus cares about people who don't deserve it. And that means there is hope for this troubled world full of troubled people. There is so much hate and division in this world today we may be tempted to believe that the devil is winning. But the devil did not win when Jesus was a helpless baby in a manger and vicious King Herod ordered the visiting wise men to let him know where the baby they sought was located, saying it was so he could worship him also. The wise men came, but they

were given wisdom from God to defy Herold and to go back home another way to avoid the paranoid Herod who really planned to kill that baby, just in case this baby might actually be a king. It's a wise truth that an encounter with Jesus changes us and we, like the wise men may be asked to go a different road in our lives than we had planned.

Sometimes we are forced to go a different road than we assumed we would and a strange road can be a frightening thing especially in the dark. Last Thursday night three of our cancer support group members leaving to go home from our meeting took the Rock Branch road to get to there. About 5:30 we came upon a truck with an empty trailer bed jackknifed across the blacktop, glass everywhere as we were told it had rolled. We were also told that they were searching the ditches for the driver. Cars were lined up on either side of the accident each trying to turn around and go back by another road. One of the women in our group had lost an eye to radiation treatment fighting cancer and could not see well in the dark. She was nervous but bravely drove back to Anthon and found her different road home back to Merville. She told me later she felt God was riding with her guiding her by signs along the road she could see. She made it home, late but safe with God as her GPS. Many of us have our roads all mapped out or think we do, but in this life we have unexpected detours, for God only

knows what reasons. However, in Christ there is never an unknown road. Not for the wise men. Not for you and me. We are not the lost but we are the found in Jesus Christ. Glory to God!

In Christ we have won the spiritual lottery. We have won the publishers Clearing House prize Sweepstakes. The people who win such unearned riches are seen jumping up and down with excitement. They have had an epiphany that will change their whole world. For some who use it wisely, it can bring happiness and probably a great deal of responsibility to be good stewards with it. For some an epiphany can be a great burden they can't handle it and they waste it all. But if they are wise men and women who seek God, they will share God's priceless epiphany with others responsibly. This is our time now to leap in joy for our riches of eternal life has been won in Jesus Christ. In this New Year, on this 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas it is our time to shine out the epiphany of God's salvation to others.

I like what Jolynne put on our sign outside the church..." wise men still seek him...and so do we!" I wonder if that last part of "and so do we" was not tacked on personally by her but I'm glad she included us, even if we are not kings or astrologers or wise men from the east. If we accept Christ right where we are today, we are given the wisdom of the Holy Spirit of God as we walk our spiritual road. We know right from wrong. We know who to

turn to in times of trouble as well as joy. We know that from the day we are born until the day we die we are called into God's circle, no matter who we are or what we have done. We know that Jesus Christ on that tree made a way for us to be safe with God for Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Amen and Amen.

Now on this 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, let us turn to page 607 to recite the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.