SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 1985

"EPIPHANY AND THE FUTURE"

MATTHEW 2:1-12

USUALLY, WE ASSOCIATE THE STORY OF THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN MOSTLY WITH CHRISTMAS AND IN SO DOING PART OF ITS MEANING IS LOST. IN MOST NATIVITY SCENES OF TODAY, THEY ARE PRESENT AT THE MANGER--HOWEVER, THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW REPORTS THAT WHEN THE WISE MEN GOT TO BETHLEHEM, AFTER FIRST STOPPING IN JERUSALEM, TO CONFER WITH CHIEF PRIESTS AND SCRIBES AND KING HEROD, THEY WENT INTO THE HOUSE AND THEY SAW THE CHILD WITH MARY, HIS MOTHER. THEIR VISIT WAS AT LEAST SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD, OR MAYBE EVEN LONGER.

THE POINT IS, THE STORY OF THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN HAS ITS OWN MEANING AND MESSAGE, AND IN TIMES PAST, IT WAS USUALLY A SEPARATE HOLIDAY AND EVENT, DISTINCT FROM CHRISTMAS--THE HOLIDAY KNOWN AS EPIPHANY, CELEBRATED ON JANUARY 6; OR WHAT WE TODAY CALL THE 12TH DAY OF CHRISTMAS.

WHAT THEN IS THE DIFFERENCE IN THE EMPHASIS AND MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS AND EPIPHANY? CHRISTMAS

EVE AND CHRISTMAS DAY BOTH CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF THE SAVIOR, AND IT REMAINS A PURELY LOCAL EVENT. EPIPHANY, ON THE OTHER HAND, SYMBOLIZED BY THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN, SPEAKS OF CHRIST AS THE SAVIOR OF ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE.

JESUS HAD BEEN BORN A JEW OF THE ROYAL LINE OF KING DAVID IN FULFILLMENT OF A LONG LINE OF HEBREW PROPHECY AND WAS TO BE THE GLORY OF HIS PEOPLE ISRAEL. BUT NOW WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS BIRTH TO THE WISE MEN IN ANOTHER COUNTRY AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT VISIT TO HIM, THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS TAKES ON AN ENTIRELY NEW DIMENSION--A DIMENSION SO NEW AND STARTLING THAT IT IS STILL NOT FULLY REALIZED. JESUS WAS NOT ONLY A JEWISH KING OR A JEWISH MESSIAH, BUT HE IS PORTRAYED AS THE SAVIOR OF ALL THE WORLD.

THE WISE MEN WHO TRAVELED TO FIND JESUS AND THEN WORSHIPPED HIM, SYMBOLIZED THEN AND NOW THE ULTIMATE UNITY OF ALL HUMAN BEINGS. HERE IS A MESSAGE OF GOOD NEWS FOR ALL THE WORLD. HERE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S INTENTION.

ALL THROUGH THE BIBLE THERE ARE STRONG HINTS OF THIS ONENESS, THIS CONNECTEDNESS, THIS UNITY. ALTHOUGH AT SOME POINTS THE PERSPECTIVE IN THE BIBLE SEEMS TO BE LITTLE MORE THAN TRIBAL AND VERY NARROW, IT ULTIMATELY BECOMES CLEAR THAT NOTHING LESS THAN THE WHOLE WORLD AND ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE ARE THE OBJECT OF GOD'S

LOVE.

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD'S PROMISE TO ABRAHAM AND SARAH WAS THAT THEIR DESCENDENTS WOULD BECOME A GREAT NATION AND WOULD BE A BLESSING TO ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, THE IDEA IS MORE FULLY DEVELOPED AND IS EXPRESSED IN SUCH STATEMENTS AS: "GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, THAT GOD GAVE HIS ONLY SON."

THEN IN THE BOOK OF ACTS, THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY ARE SET SQUARELY IN A CONTEXT OF THE TOTAL HISTORY OF THE PLANET EARTH. LISTEN: "GOD MADE FROM ONE EVERY NATION OF PEOPLE TO LIVE ON ALL THE FACE OF THE EARTH." HERE AS IN OTHER PLACES IN THE BIBLE, HUMAN BEINGS ARE IDENTIFIED AS A BIOLOGICAL UNITY, AND SET WITHIN THE SWEEP OF WHAT WE WOULD TODAY CALL "COSMIC EVOLUTION."

SUCH A CLAIM BY JESUS AND LATER BY THE APOSTLE PAUL, THAT WE LIVE IN ONE WORLD AS ONE FAMILY, MUST'VE SEEMED PREPOSTEROUS TO MANY PEOPLE IN THAT DAY, JUST AS THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN MUST'VE SEEMED STRANGE AND OUT OF PLACE.

YET WE WHO LIVE IN TODAY'S WORLD ARE EXPERIENCING MORE AND MORE THE FACT THAT WE ARE ONE FAMILY, ONE PEOPLE UNDER GOD. NOT TOO MANY YEARS AGO, A FAMINE IN AFRICA WOULD'VE GONE UNNOTICED BY MOST OF THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD. BUT NOW WITH WORLD-GIRDLING COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS,

WE CAN SEE IT WITH OUR OWN EYES ALMOST IMMEDIATELY.

THE EXAMPLES OF OUR CONNECTEDNESS ARE EVERYWHERE. AN ECONOMIC RECESSION OR DEPRESSION IN ONE PART OF THE WORLD IS FELT IN MANY OTHER PLACES. WE WORRY TODAY NOT JUST ABOUT OUR OIL PRICES, BUT ABOUT WORLD OIL PRICES. AS THE WORLD RUSHES ON WE NOW KNOW THAT ALL OF OUR PROBLEMS ARE RAPIDLY BECOMING WORLD PROBLEMS, WHETHER IT BE APARTHIED IN SOUTH AFRICA, THE RUSSIANS IN AFGANISTAN, THE CIA IN NICARAGUA, OR TERRORISTS IN IRAN. ADD TO THIS THE FACT THAT A NUCLEAR WAR WOULD BE DEVASTATING FOR EVERYONE EVERYWHERE. WE ARE ONE WORLD WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT.

AND THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE WHO DON'T LIKE IT. THUS ONE OF THE STRONGEST AND MOST DANGEROUS FORCES IN OUR TIME IS A TREND TOWARD TRIBALISM. AS MARTIN MARTY PUTS IT: "TRIBALISM CALLS ME TO LINK 'MY' GODS-PEOPLE-PLACE-CULTURE OVER AGAINST 'THEIR' GODS-PEOPLE-PLACE-CULTURE IN AN ENDLESS CYCLE OF DEFENSIVE AND AGGRESSIVE ACTS."

ISN'T IT IRONIC THAT AT A TIME WHEN WE ARE MORE AND MORE AWARE OF OUR CONNECTEDNESS AND ARE MORE AND MORE DEPENDENT ON EACH OTHER AS INDIVIDUALS AND NATIONS, WE ALSO ARE SPENDING MORE AND MORE ON ARMAMENTS, ON WEAPONS OF DESTRUCTION THAN EVER BEFORE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD.

AT A TIME WHEN IT SHOULD BE ON THE DECREASE, TRIBALISM IS ON THE INCREASE. IN AN AGE OF TERRORISM AND EASILY AVAILABLE WEAPONRY, IT REMAINS A DESTRUCTIVE FORCE. TODAY INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS THAT PROMOTE EMPATHY, TOLERANCE AND RESPONSIVENESS BETWEEN PEOPLE AND GROUPS, DO NOT PROSPER NEARLY AS MUCH AS DO INTROVERTED AND AGGRESSIVE GROUPS.

THUS THE MESSAGE OF EPIPHANY NEEDS TO BE PROCLAIMED IN EVERY WAY AND IN EVERY PLACE. HEAR, O PEOPLES OF THE EARTH, THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE GOD. GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD, ALL THE WORLD, NOT JUST ONE TRIBE OR ONE PEOPLE OR ONE RELIGION OR ONE NATION--THE WHOLE WORLD, THAT GOD SENT THE SAVIOR.

AND CHRIST THE SAVIOR CAME TO SAVE US FROM THE MOST DEVASTATING AND BASIC SIN OF ALL--THE SIN OF SEPARATENESS--THE SIN OF SAYING THAT ONE INDIVIDUAL OR NATION OR GROUP IS MORE FAVORED BY GOD THAN ANOTHER. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT GOD'S PURPOSE IN ONE WORLD IS TO HAVE ALL PEOPLE EXACTLY ALIKE--BUT GOD'S WILL IS TO HAVE ALL PERSONS WORKING TOGETHER IN HARMONY--EACH IN HIS OR HER OWN UNIQUENESS. THAT'S THE MESSAGE OF EPIPHANY!

THIS MORNING THEN, ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY OF THE NEW YEAR, CHRIST INVITES US TO COME TO HIS TABLE IN THIS SPIRIT--BEING AWARE THAT

WE ARE ALL A PART OF GOD'S FAMILY AND THAT NO MATTER HOW UNEQUAL OUR ABILITY, GOD LOVES US EQUALLY! AMEN.