

Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC
Sunday, December 27, 2015
Matthew 2:1-23
A Reading for the First Sunday after Christmas

The Fourth (Other) Wise Man
Adapted from Henry Van Dyke
By Joy swarthy Sawatzky

(We will sing Hymn #151, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,”
throughout the reading.)

In the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod reigned in Jerusalem, high on the hill overlooking the region of Persia sat the estate of Artaban the Median, a priest of the Magi, a king in his own right.

On this particular night, as he stood on the terrace of his roof, dawn was threatening to arrive. The cool and quiet that reaches its peak just before the first rays of sunlight appear had begun. Far over the eastern plain a white mist stretched like a lake. Just above that, the sky was perfectly clear.

Artaban was trying to free his mind from all that had happened just hours before, trying to make sense of it, actually. His friends could not comprehend his new-found understanding, that the answers were no longer in the stars. They refused to go with him on his journey to find the King who was to be born this night. In fact, they had wondered out loud: what had happened to Artaban’s rational mind, his predictability, even his sanity? They had know him as a scientist . . . not a believer in a child born to become the King, and to be the hope of the world, out of some vague predictions. Artaban held on to the knowledge that at least three of his colleagues among the Magi believed with him. They understood why he would he would sell his home and all of his possessions, and use what he received in order to buy gifts for this king yet to be born. Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar would be the ones who would join together with him to journey to find this one to be born King of Israel.

He reached into the pocket of his robe and drew out three great gems — one blue as a fragment of the night sky, one redder than a ray of sunrise, and one as pure as the peak of a snow mountain at sunrise.

His gifts to the king — his tribute, to honor him. “Religion without a great hope, would be like an altar without a living fire. It would be pointless,” Artaban spoke, if only to himself. Artaban believed with all of his heart that this child, yet to be born, would be that hope.

As Artaban looked back to the sky, his eyes opened wide with wonder! Out of the darkness began an explosion of color. It was as if the colors of the jewels in his hand mixed together and finally exploded into a point of white radiance. The star shone in the distance.

“This is it. It is the sign!” he said. “The King is coming, and I will go to meet him!”

Verse 1 of Hymn #151: “We Three Kings of Orient Are”

***We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.***

And before the sun began its journey across the sky, the Fourth Wise Man was in the saddle of his swiftest, most trusted horse, riding to meet his friends.

Artaban knew he must ride wisely and well if he was to arrive at the appointed hour with the other Magi. Fifteen parasangs was the absolute most that he could push the horse to travel in a day. At that pace, he would reach the Temple of the Seven Spheres just before midnight on the tenth day . . . the appointed place and time of meeting.

Artaban’s prized horse was almost spent as he arrived at nightfall of the tenth day, beneath the shattered walls of Babylon. He would have turned into the city to find rest and food for himself and his horse, except that he knew that he had three hour’s journey yet to the Temple of the Seven Spheres. He must reach the place by midnight if he were to find his comrades waiting. So he did not stop, but continued on. A grove of date-palms made an island of gloom up ahead. As the horse passed into the shadow of it she slowed her pace and began to pick her way more carefully.

Near the farther end of the darkness, caution seemed to overtake the horse. She sensed some danger or difficulty. The grove was close and silent as a tomb; not a leaf rustled, not a bird sang.

At last she stood stock-still, quivering in very muscle, before a dark object in the shadow of the last palm tree.

Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying across the road. His humble dress and the outline of his haggard face showed that he was probably one of the poor Hebrew exiles who still dwelt in great numbers in the vicinity. The chill of death was in his lean hand, and as Artaban released it, the arm fell back limply on to the motionless breast. He turned away with a thought of pity, resigning the body to that strange burial which the Priests of the Magi deemed most fitting — the funeral of the desert where vultures and varmints would pick the bones clean.

But as he turned, a long, faint, ghostly sigh came from the man's lips, and the brown, bony fingers closed on the hem of the Priestly Magi's robe and held him fast. Artaban's heart leaped to his throat, not so much with fear, but with a dumb resentment at the in opportunity of the timing . . . of the possibility of a delay while so close to his destination.

How could he stay here in the darkness to minister to a dying stranger? What was his duty? If he was delayed for even an hour he could hardly reach the meeting place at the appointed time, and his companions would think he had given up the journey. They would go without him. He would lose his quest, the quest he had invested so much in.

But if he went now, the man would surely die. His spirit was in agonizing turmoil. Should he turn aside, if only for a moment, from the following of the star, to give a cup of cold water to a poor, perishing Hebrew?

"God of truth and purity," he prayed, "direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom which only you know."

Then he turned back to the sick man. Loosening the grasp of his hand, he carried him to a little mound at the foot of the palm-tree. Assuring first that he was comfortable, he brought water from one of the small canals nearby, and moistened the sufferer's brow and mouth. He mixed a drink of one of those simple but potent remedies which he always carried in his belt — for the Magi were physicians as well as astrologers — and poured it slowly between the colorless lips. Hour after hour he labored as only a skillful healer of disease can do; and, at last, the man's strength returned; he sat up and looked about him.

"Who are you?" he asked, in the uneducated dialect of the country.

"I am Artaban, of the Magi, and I am going to Jerusalem in search of one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer of ALL. I cannot delay any longer on my journey, for the caravan that has waited for me may leave without me.

“Here is all that I have left of bread and wine and here is a portion of healing herbs. When your strength is restored, you can find your way home.”

The Jew raised his trembling hand solemnly to heaven. He looked at Artaban and said, “I have nothing to give you in return for what you have done for me — only this; that I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought. For our prophets have said that he should be born not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem of Judah. May the Lord bring you safely to that place, because you have had pity upon the sick.”

Verse 2 of Hymn #151: “We Three Kings of Orient Are”

***Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain, gold I bring to crown him
again, King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.***

It was already long past midnight. Artaban rode as quickly as was possible. The great horse, restored by the brief rest, dipped into her last remaining strength and fled over the ground like a gazelle. Even so, the first beam of the sun sent a shadow before the horse as she entered the final steps of the journey, and the eyes of Artaban, anxiously scanning the first glimpses of the Temple of the Seven Spheres, could detect no trace of his friends.

He dismounted and climbed the highest terrace, looking out toward the west.

The huge desolation of the marshes stretched away to the horizon to the border of the desert. There was no sign of the caravan of the three wise men, far or near.

At the edge of the terrace he saw a little pile of broken bricks, and under them a piece of parchment. He picked up the parchment and read: “We have waited past the midnight hour and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert.”

Artaban sat down upon the ground and covered his head in despair. “How can I cross the desert,” he moaned, “with no food and with a spent horse? I will have to return to Babylon, sell one of my jewels, and buy a train of camels and provisions for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only God the merciful knows whether I shall lose the sight of the King because I stopped to show mercy.”

So Artaban did indeed return to Babylon, and with his sapphire he purchased what he needed for the journey. Through heat and cold, Artaban, Priest of the Magi, the Fourth Wise Man, moved steadily onward — crossing the desert.

He arrive weary, but full of hope in Bethlehem, bearing yet his ruby and his pearl to offer to the King. “Now at last,” he said, “I shall surely find him. This is the place the Hebrew exile told me that the prophets had spoken of.”

As he searched for the place where the baby lay, he was aware of the desolation of the streets. All was an eerie quiet. From the open door of a low stone cottage he heard the sound of a woman’s voice singing softly. He entered and found a young mother hushing her baby to rest. She told him of the three wise men that had appeared in the village three days ago, and how they said that a star had guided them to the place where Joseph of Nazareth was lodging with his wife, Mary, and her newborn child. She told how they had given many rich gifts to the child to honor him.

Verse 3 of Hymn #151: “We Three Kings of Orient Are”

***Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a deity nigh; prayer
and praising gladly raising, worshiping God Most High.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.***

“But the travelers disappeared again, as suddenly as they had come. And the man of Nazareth took the babe and his wife and fled away that same night secretly, and it was whispered that they were going far away to Egypt. Ever since there has been a spell upon the village; something evil hangs over it. They say that the Roman soldiers are coming from Jerusalem to force a new tax from us, and the men have driven the flocks and herds far back among the hills, and hidden themselves to escape it.”

The young mother laid the babe in its cradle, and rose to care for the strange guest. She set food out for him, what little food she had — graciously offered and graciously received. Suddenly there came the noise of wild confusion and uproar in the streets of the village, a shrieking and wailing of women’s voices, a clanging of swords, and desperate cries: “The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!”

The young mother’s face grew white with terror. She held her child close to her, and crouched motionless in the darkest corner of the room, covering him with the folds of her robe, praying he would not wake up and

cry. Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway of the house. His royal bearing filled the opening, blocking any sight of the home within.

The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and dripping swords. At the sight of the stranger in his imposing dress, they hesitated with surprise. Artaban did not move, but he said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace." He showed the ruby, glistening in the hollow of his hand like a great drop of blood. The captain barely hesitated, but stretched out his hand and took the ruby greedily. "March on!" he cried to his men. "There is no child here."

The clamor and the clang of arms moved down the street. Artaban re-entered the cottage. He turned his face to the east and prayed: "God of truth, forgive my sin! I have said the thing that is not, to save the life of a child. And two of my gifts are gone. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

But the voice of the woman, weeping for joy in the shadow behind him said very gently, "Because you have saved the life of my little one, may the Lord bless you and keep; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

Verse 4 of Hymn #151: "We Three Kings of Orient Are"

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.

So, the Fourth Wise Man traveled from place to place. Beginning in Egypt, he searched among the people the dispersion. He saw hunger and famine, plague-stricken cities, the imprisoned and the enslaved. In all the morass of humanity, he found none to worship, but many to help. He fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick, and comforted the captive. His years went by more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle through the loom, leaving behind a pattern of love and compassion. It seemed almost as if he had forgotten his quest.

Thirty-three years of the life of Artaban passed away, and still he was a pilgrim and a seeker after light. His hair was now white as the wintry snow. Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the King, he

had come for the last time to Jerusalem. He had often visited the holy city before and had searched through all its lanes and crowded hovels and black prisons without finding any trace of the family of Nazarenes who had fled from Bethlehem long ago. But now it seemed as if he must make one more effort, and something whispered in his heart that, at last, he just might succeed. It was the season of the Passover. The city was teeming with strangers and many languages.

But on this day there was a singular agitation visible in the multitude. The sky was veiled with a dark and rolling gloom. Artaban joined with a group of people from his own country, Parthian Jews who had come up to keep the Passover, and inquired of them the cause of the agitation and where they were going.

“We are going,” they answered, “to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, where there is to be an execution. Haven’t you heard what has happened? Two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly. But the priests and elders have said that he must die, because he named himself as the Son of God. Pilate has sent him to the cross because he said that he was King of the Jews.”

Artaban’s heart beat quickly. Could it be the same one who had been born in Bethlehem thirty-three years ago, at whose birth the star had appeared in heaven? He said within himself, “Could it be that my last pearl is just in time to offer for his ransom and save his life?”

So the old man followed the crowd. Just beyond the entrance of the guard-house a troop of Macedonian soldiers came down the street, dragging a young girl with torn dress and matted hair. As the once noble and stately Magi, still priestly in his bearing, paused to look at her with compassion, she suddenly broke from the hands of her tormentors and threw herself at his feet.

“Have pity on me,” she cried, “and save me, for the sake of the God of purity! I also am a daughter of the true religion which is taught by the Magi. My father was a merchant of Parthis, but he is dead, and I am seized for debts to be sold as a slave. Save me from this fate worse than death.”

Artaban trembled. It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem — the conflict between the expectation and the impulse of love. The conflict between the gift he hoped to offer the king and the open-faced need right before his eyes. This was his last time to face this choice.

One thing only was sure to his divided heart — to rescue this helpless girl would be a true deed of love. And is not love the light of the soul? He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so luminous, so radiant, so full of tender, living luster. As he looked at it, a soft and iridescent light, full of shifting gleams of blue and rose, trembled upon its surface. It seemed to have absorbed some reflection of the colors of the lost ruby and sapphire. He took one last look and laid it in the hand of the slave. “This is your ransom, daughter! It is the last of my treasures which I have kept for the King.”

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky thickened, and shuddering tremors ran through the earth. The walls of the house where they stood in the shadows rocked back and forth. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. Dust-clouds filled the air. The soldiers fled in terror. But Artaban and the girl whom he had ransomed crouched helpless beneath the wall of the Praetorium.

Verse 5 of Hymn #151: “We Three Kings of Orient Are”

***Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice: Alleluia! Alleluia! sounds through the earth and skies.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.***

What did he have to fear? What did he have to live for? He had given away the last gift to the King, his tribute. And with that he gave up the hope of ever finding Him. The quest was over, and it had failed. But, even in that thought, there was peace. It was not resignation. It was not submission. It was something more profound and searching. He knew that all was well, because he had done the best that he could, from day to day. He had been true to the light that had been given to him.

One more lingering tremor of the earthquake quivered through the ground. A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his white head resting on the young girl’s shoulder, and the blood trickling from the wound.

As she bent over him, afraid he was dead, a sound came through the twilight, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance, in which the notes are clear but the words are lost. The girl turned her head to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one. The old man’s lips began to move, as if in answer. Clearly he had heard the

words, and she heard him say in the Parthian tongue, “Not so, my Lord. For when did I see you?”

He stopped talking and the sweet voice came again. And again the girl heard it, very faint and far away, but now it seemed as though she too understood the words. She heard, “Truly I say unto you, inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban, like the first ray of dawn on a snowy mountain peak, and one long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips.

His journey was ended. His treasurers were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.