

s"The Lion of Judah"
Genesis 49:8-12

December 11, 2013

2nd Advent Service

The lion is a mighty animal, stronger than the other animals. In many stories, the lion rules over all the other animals. He is called the king of the jungle. The second verse of our Quemapas carol tells us about a lion who would be king, those who would be seeking him, and how they would find him.

The verse speaks about "SAGES, westward faring." These sages are the Wise Men from the Christmas story. Some people think they were sorcerers who studied the stars and believed in (special) signs. We don't know how many there were – three, five, or ten. However, they did bring three gifts and that's the reason people think there were three wise men. The three gifts were gold, FRANKINCENSE, and MYRRH – all fit for a king. Those gifts fit in with the goal for the Wise Men.

These men were not out for a pleasure trip or to take a vacation in Israel. These wise men were searching for a king – a very special king. They were familiar with the Jewish Scripture – the Old Testament. They had studied the prophecies and learned about a new king being born. They had probably studied our text, the prophecy from the book of GENESIS, "You are a lion's cub (baby) O Judah...the scepter (stick for king) will not depart from JUDAH until the promised one comes." The lion of Judah would be a king. The eternal throne and (eternal) kingdom would reside in the hands of Judah's King forever.

When they saw the huge star in the heavens, they believed it was a sign. They left their home and began their journey to find that king. What did they expect to find? They likely expected to find a kingdom of perfect peace and prosperity. They expected a kingdom full of joy and celebration. The prophecy said that there would be so much wine – a symbol of joy - they would be able to wash their clothes in wine.

While they were traveling, apparently the star disappeared from their view. Was it extinguished? Did bad weather block its light? We don't know. But now they decided they had to use their human intellect to find this great king – the lion of Judah. This great king must be in Israel's capital city so they went to Jerusalem. This lion of Judah must be in a king's palace so they went to King Herod's palace. All of that made sense and seemed right.

Soon, they were disappointed. They did not find the mighty lion of Judah, but King Herod who seemed more like the Cowardly Lion from the Wizard of Oz. Herod did not welcome them, but was suspicious of them. There was no new king. Herod was the only king and he wanted it to stay that way. He was so paranoid that he killed his wife and several sons because he thought they were trying to become king instead of him.

The wise men were deflated. They expected to find celebration for the new king's birth in the streets of Jerusalem, but no one had heard of him. They expected to find the lion of Judah in the palace but they found only a cowardly lion. Their journey seemed to be at an end.

Everything changed when the priests consulted the Scriptures and found that the king would not be born in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. When the Wise Men heard and followed the Word of God, God's guidance appeared in the sky – there was the star again, leading them to Bethlehem and stopping over the house where Jesus was.

The Wise Men were likely stunned. Here was the lion of Judah? This was not Jerusalem – it was a tiny town. This was not a (huge) palace – it was a peasant house with two rooms, one of which was for the animals. This was not a lion, but a tiny baby. There was no celebration, no scepter, no new kingdom.

But what did they do? They were overjoyed. They believed the Word of God. They believed what God said rather than what their eyes saw. They had faith despite what they saw. They had faith in what they saw. This WAS the lion of Judah, the king of Israel, the Savior of the world here in the flesh. That faith moved (inspired) them to do two things. They bowed down and worshiped this

baby king. And they presented their gifts – the best that they had – to demonstrate their faith and to give thanks to God.

We are on an Advent journey now, just like the sages and their journey long ago. God calls us to find His Son and all the blessings that He has to give. It's easy to copy the sages' behavior and expect this Savior to be the lion of Judah – a strong and mighty King. He will come and bring peace and prosperity to our world if we follow His teachings. There will be joy and celebration if we only believe in Him. But that's a wrong understanding.

How does this happen? We use our human intellect to make sense of this. We think, "If God loves me, He would want me to be happy. I should have all that I want and need. I should be successful in school and work. My life should be full of joy and celebration every day of my life." But what do we experience? We feel sadness and disappointment. We don't have all that we want and sometimes we don't have all we need. We experience failure. We have joy and celebration near Christmas time, but not enough joy and celebration during the rest of the year.

Our mind tells us something is wrong. Maybe God doesn't love us. Maybe the lion of Judah is a just a big kitty cat and can't help us. Maybe the Savior failed to save us.

Then, we become like the Wise Men and hear the Word of God. The Holy Spirit, like a bright shining star, leads us to the truth. He leads us with the Wise Men to a manger – a cattle trough – to a tiny baby. He gives us faith to believe that this is not an ordinary peasant baby, but the Savior and the Son of God to boot.

The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to lead us later to a cross where this baby now become a man is hanging. He gives us faith to believe that this is not a tragic execution, but God's plan to save us from our sin and all the suffering from sin. We come to believe that He has our sins on the cross and is dying for our salvation.

The Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to lead us later to an empty tomb. The baby who became a man and suffered, died and was buried is no longer there. The Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe that He is alive and will give us life after we die.

We wish that we had a bright star in the sky to lead us, but we have something even better and clearer. The Bible describes God's plan for us and the Holy Spirit gives us faith to trust that plan. We trust what God has said instead of trusting our eyes and our heart. We believe despite what we see in a humble manger, an ordinary cross, and a rugged tomb. We trust what we see by faith – a Savior lying in that manger for us, hanging on that cross for us, and walking out of that tomb for us.

Jesus, our mighty lion of Judah, does not solve all our problems yet. He did not solve all the problems for the Wise Men either. But He will when He comes again. He will destroy all evil and restore (set up) all good again. Therefore (that means), all we can do is copy the Wise Men. We meet here to fall down and worship the lion cub, the Baby of Bethlehem. We open our gifts and give our treasures, not because He needs them, but because we have a need to give.

Tonight's song verse seems strange: "Judah's lion reigns this (Christmas) morn! God's own Son is born a child, is born a child." A lion and a baby seem contradictory because a lion is strong and a baby is weak, but they are not. The strong Son of God chooses to become a weak baby and humbly suffer and die. The weak Savior becomes strong by rising from the dead to live and never die. We, who are weak, put our faith and our hope in the Lion of Judah and, because of Him, we become truly and eternally strong. Amen.