

Firsts are important to us. Today is the first Sunday of the New Year, so Happy New Year! This is also the first weekend of the NFL playoffs. Since I grew up in Illinois, Go Bears! Parents get excited about a baby's first words and first steps. We remember our first car and first job. We just celebrated the First Christmas, remembering when God sent His Son into the world to be our Savior. This month we want take a look at some of the firsts in the life of Jesus, beginning with His first international visitors. For those of you who are counting, this is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, also known as Epiphany. This is the day we remember and celebrate the arrival of the Wise Men to see and worship Jesus.

Our impression of the first international visitors might come from the song "We Three Kings of Orient Are." This writer made some assumptions that are probably not correct. First of all, we don't know how many wise men came to see Jesus. Matthew tells us wise men came from the East. People assume three Wise Men because they brought three gifts, but that doesn't mean there were three wise men. The song calls them kings. But Matthew says they are magi, wise men who studied the stars. And they probably didn't come from the Orient meaning India, China or other nations in that part of Asia. They probably came from Babylon or modern day Iraq. The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem about 580 years before Jesus was born and took many of the leading people to Babylon. Some stayed behind when the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland. Their sacred writings could have been studied by the Wise Men in Babylon.

Even if the words of the song are wrong, the first international visit to Jesus is extremely important. Jesus didn't come just for the Jews. He came as the Savior of all people. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "*The people who walk in darkness will see a great light. For those who live in a land of deep darkness, a light will shine.*" (Isaiah 9:2 NLT) The Wise Men saw and followed the Star in the night sky that led them first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in search of the newborn king of the Jews.

Jesus didn't just come for the Jewish people. Jesus said, "*I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.*" (John 8:12 NLT) The visit of the Wise Men makes it perfectly clear that Jesus came to save all people from their sins. The Apostle Paul wrote, "*There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Galatians 3:28 NLT) Jesus came to save us all.

The prophet Isaiah wrote, "*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*" (Isaiah 60:1) Today we remember the coming of the light of Christ into the world, a light that drives away the darkness of sin, isolation and despair. Even when we go through those darks days of life, the light of God's love continues to shine on us. Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness, the light that gives us hope and peace.

With Jesus, we have the gift of forgiveness. We all need forgiveness because we cannot obey God's commands on our own. If we can't even keep our New Year Resolutions, how can we expect to keep God's Laws? Either we do the things we shouldn't do or we fail to do the good things God wants us to do. But God still loves us. He calls us to repentance and faith. He promises, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* (1 John 1:9 NLT)

With Jesus, we are connected with Christ and with each other. Jesus destroyed the barrier of sin and guilt that cut us off from God. We are the people of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We are all part of the Body of Christ. God brings us together to help, support and encourage one another. We need each other. It is very hard to be a solo Christian, especially in a secular world where people live without God in their lives. We can do more together than we can on our own.

Jesus gives us the promise of everlasting life. When the light of Christ shines in our lives we realize that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God. This is the promise of life the way God intended it to be from the very beginning. Revelation tells us this about eternal life. *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever."* (Revelation 21:4 NLT)

Christ's light does more than make us feel good. It also changes our attitude toward the world around us. Jesus helps us to see the world in a new light, one that reveals that the people around us are not enemies or opponents. They are human beings made in the image of God. Jesus helps us to forgive instead of punish, to work for the common good instead of our narrow self-interest. Jesus invites us to see ourselves not as members of a particular family, community or nation but as citizens in the kingdom of God.

Jesus invites us into the light of God's love. When we walk in the light of Christ, we discover that the goal of our lives is not to earn the most money, win the most awards, close the most deals or accumulate the most possessions. Instead, it is to be the authentic men and women that God created us to be. The goal of our lives is to be standing in the presence of our loving Lord, to love God who first loved us.

The Wise Men followed the Star that led them to Jesus. Then they bowed down to worship Him and offered their gifts. Jesus is standing at the door of our hearts today, on this first Sunday of the New Year. Open your heart and life to Him. It is the first thing to do in this New Year.