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Where are the wise men?

By Right Revered William E. Swing

Two thousand years ago on the first Christmas, the headlines were about Caesar Augustus' enrollment for the purpose of taxation. Today at Christmastime, our headlines are about tax breaks.

Two thousand years ago "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was a city of an occupied territory. Today Bethlehem is still a city of an occupied territory.

Two thousand years ago King Herod was searching for classified information concerning a possible rival. Today Wiki Leaks has taken the guesswork out of snooping.

Two thousand years ago the Holy Family had a dream, scooped up their child and immigrated to Egypt. Today we have a "Dream Act" pending to assist immigrant young people.

The human heart hasn't changed much over time, and the core issues we face are still the same. But something critical has changed. As I see it, the difference is in the magnitude of harm that humans are capable of inflicting - on themselves, on each other, and on their environment. To give some examples: we have exploited the nuclear potential such that nations are on alert for annihilation; we have exploited the environment so radically that water scarcity could start wars and the weather could become devastatingly capricious; and we have exploited religious differences to the extent that human gatherings of all kinds are now potential targets for fanatical suicide bombers. In 2000 years the world has definitely and dangerously changed.

Looking back to the original Christmas story, we see three wise men stepping forward to present gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Fast forward. Three gifts today worthy of Biblical mention, what would they be? In my mind, these are the things most precious:

- 1) If we could reduce the nuclear threat through verification, restraints and reduction of warheads, and build a momentum for total elimination of the weapons, that would be like gold.
- 2) If we could accept accountability for and stewardship of the environment, if we could build in safeguards, create legislation for sustainability and develop an ever-greener economy, that would be like frankincense.
- 3) If we could build respectful interfaith relationships, strive to end religiously motivated violence and create a new global culture of religiously diverse people who build communities together, that would be like myrrh.

Soon it will be 2011. "The hopes and fears of all the years." Where are the Wise Women? The Wise Children? The Wise Men? Where are their gifts? They are in our hands, while the world waits in expectation.

*Right Revered William E. Swing, former Episcopal Bishop of California and President of **United Religions Initiative**, a global network of interfaith organizations.*

BY RIGHT REVERED WILLIAM E. SWING | DECEMBER 20, 2010; 1:20 PM ET

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