

January 7, 2024 - Epiphany

Prayer of the Day

O God, on this day you revealed your Son to the nations by the leading of a star. Lead us now by faith to know your presence in our lives, and bring us at last to the full vision of your glory, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon

We have all sung the carol, "We Three Kings."

We have all seen the nativities, with the three foreign looking people in fancy robes, offering gifts to the child in the manger.

We have all seen the Christmas Cards with three people riding camels, following a star in the sky, and heading toward a small village on the horizon.

And we have all seen the Christmas pageants, with three kids wearing adult-sized bathrobes, with towels wrapped around their heads, carrying cardboard containers which have been spray-painted gold, stumbling in at the end of the story to present their gifts to the baby.

It all seems so simple and uncomplicated.

But, of course, it's not.

Matthew, the author of this story, starts and ends his recounting of the birth of Jesus with King Herod, a ruthless ruler with a long record of putting people to death whom he perceived as a threat (whether they were actually trying to replace him on the throne or not).

By bookending his story this way, Matthew points out, right away, that Jesus was not born into a neutral situation. He was born at a time of political maneuvering, of empire building, of normalized violence and danger, and peace for God's people being an unrealistic dream.

And into this situation of power grabbing and political games, come magi, wise men, most likely astrologers, asking about the birth of one they claim is to be "the king of the Jews."

In Matthew's telling of this story, it's not shepherd's in the fields who first hear the news of the birth of Jesus. It's foreigners, outsiders, followers of different religions, who seem to think that the stars predict the future and indicate, to those who can read the signs, how to live their lives.

So, these magi already have two strikes against them. They are foreigners, and they worship stars instead of the creator *of* the stars.

And yet, their word is accepted by Herod. Which says much more about Herod than it does about the magi. Someone like Herod who has successfully manipulated the power structures to put himself in charge, is going to be very wary of others trying to do the same thing. He will be watching every*one* and every*thing* with a large amount of suspicion, always alert to the slightest hint of threat to his position and power.

So when these foreigners show up with rumours of another claimant to his throne, Herod takes immediate notice. Because, of course, he's not just nervous about people who want his throne, he is also nervous about foreign *powers* taking an interest in such things. A lone individual with delusions of grandeur is not much of a threat; some one with such desires *who has the backing of others*, especially rich and powerful strangers, are a much more imminent problem.

Herod tries to learn what he can about this usurper and whoever is supporting him, and then, in a most cynical move, pretends to support the magi in their quest.

Matthew then includes a bit of irony in his story. Remember, the magi had begun their journey because of a star. But then they took a detour by looking for "the king of the Jews" in the halls of power. However, now, when they *leave* Herod to continue their journey, they see the star again, leading away *from* the halls of power.

This is a pretty plain statement that Jesus is, *indeed*, a threat to Herod, and *all* the Herods of the world, but not for the reason they suppose. Jesus is a threat, not because he wants to take power for himself, but because he invites all of us, including the Herods of the world, to give *up* power, to let *go* of it..., for the sake of life. Jesus' coming is a sign of healing and peace, and the end of terror and death.

Unfortunately, all of the Herods throughout history only seem to *understand* terror and death, even when it is made plain that God's love *will* have the final say.

Matthew returns us to the magi, following the star. It leads them where they are going, stops at their destination, and they rejoice.

And can we just take a moment to give thanks for the grace of God which goes with us and leads us, even when we take unfortunate, or even harmful, detours? The star didn't disappear or stop shining because the magi abandoned following it. It was always there, always shining, always inviting, always calling. It was there when they made their mistaken visit to the halls of power, it was still there when they finally resumed following it, and it took them where they needed to go in spite of themselves.

This is a wonderful parable of God's love for broken people, in the middle of Matthew's larger story of God's love for broken people.

Matthew then mentions the gifts these stargazers bring to Jesus and his family. Three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

This is where the number three comes from by the way. There is no mention of the number of magi. There is no mention of their names, at least in Matthew's telling of the story. Some scholars even wonder if at least some of the magi might have been women!

The point is, we know as much as *Herod* did about the identity of these people, which is virtually nothing.

But that's kind of the point. This story is not so much about the magi as it is about God's presence in the birth of Jesus, and God's continuing activity in making this birth known. Even to foreigners. Even to stargazers. Even to people who took unnecessary and even harmful detours.

It's also instructive to note that there is no hint that these magi ever became believers, or disciples, or apostles, or anything else. They appeared on the scene, played their part, and quietly exited the stage.

And yet, God's caring presence and actions continued, so that the magi were guided away from the halls of power on their return journey.

We call this story "the Epiphany," when God began revealing the presence of God's messiah in the world. Epiphany is a promise, to the magi, and to us, of the continuing presence of God in the world. Epiphany is a promise that the light of God's grace will continue to shine, guiding, calling, inviting and welcoming *all* people. Epiphany is a promise, made and constantly renewed, to everyone: stargazers, politicians, misguided advisors, strangers from unknown parts, and even us, who come on the scene, play our small part, and then quietly exit the stage.

Epiphany is a promise that God's love comes *to* all, *for* all, *with* all, and *through* all.

No matter how many detours we make. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the presence of God with all creation, we offer our prayers for the world God loves, the church God calls, and for all people according to their needs.

[Short pause]

A - Holy One, you led the magi to Jesus by the light of a star. Guide your people by the light of your love, that we may share your love with the world. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy One, you accepted the gifts of outsiders. Remind us of your generosity to all people, that we may celebrate the riches you have shared with the world. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy One, Jesus was protected from Herod's designs by the bravery of the magi and the faithfulness of his parents. Use your people to protect the vulnerable, provide sanctuary to refugees, and encourage those who have given up. Inspire hope in your world. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy One, you speak to your church through ancient stories, which not only remind us of the past, but point us into our present reality. Fill your church with determination to follow your leading into the world. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy One, your Good News sends us to bring healing to the sick, freedom to the prisoner, food to the hungry, clothing to the cold, and love for all. We ask for your strength, that we may reach out to those in need, especially Barb Keizer, Louise Acker, Mary Meisner, Deborah Wentzell, Ruth Corkum-Himmelman, Pastor Rick, Sherman Palmer, the families of Dannie Strickland and Gearld Hubley, and those we name before you.

[Long pause]

God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Holy One, your welcome extends far beyond our imagining. Move us beyond our fears and our limits, that we may trust the light of your presence in all the world. God who welcomes all,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.