

Wise People Still Come¹
Matthew 2:1-12
Matthew 2: 13-18
Micah 5:2-5a

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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(Epiphany celebrated)

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.

Matthew 2: 13-18

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

¹ This sermon, and the discussion of fear therein, owe much to Rev. David Lose's commentary at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1509>

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;
and he shall be the one of peace.

We are celebrating Epiphany this Sunday. This leads to the inevitable question, what is Epiphany? If you look it up in the dictionary, you will be told that an epiphany is, “The manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi,” or “A manifestation of a divine or supernatural being,” or “A moment of sudden revelation or insight.”²

All right, so that makes sense. Today is the first definition, right? The one with the Magi?

Yes, and...

Today, God willing, we will celebrate all three.

But first, a little housekeeping and explanation. The word in the original that our Bible translators have translated as “wise men” is *magi*. *Magi* were astrologers, soothsayers, and philosophers. They included scholars and charlatans. Some of the

² Oxford Dictionaries, as posted online in Bing Translator.

guilds also included both men and women. The term *magi* would refer to any or all of these.

They were not kings, in the same way that Herod was a king. They were wealthy people, as proven by the fact that they were giving away gold and precious spices, but they were not rulers. But that's okay. We can still sing "We Three Kings." It describes them and tells what they were doing.

The story that the liturgist read this morning is these magi's only appearance on stage. We hear nothing more about them anywhere in the Bible. We do not know that there were three of them: we know that there were more than one. But, since there were three kinds of gifts, three is a convenient way to depict them in everything from paintings to Christmas pageants to Nativity scenes.

We do not know their names, or where they were from. Some medieval pageant-writer came up with the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, and the idea that they came from three different countries. Mary and Joseph may never have known or understood their names or homelands. And it's not important.

The Magi did not come to the manger: they came a long way, and it's understandable if they were a little late. We know this from putting some things together. They gave Mary and Joseph, who were good Jews, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

But, when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the Temple when he was a week old, they were given a choice of offerings, and they offered "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons," which was the offering for those who could not afford a one-year-old

lamb.³ If they had any significant amount of gold, or frankincense or myrrh, which were worth more than gold, once for ounce,⁴ then they could certainly have afforded a lamb.

No, far more likely, the magi came after that, and their offerings paid for the trip when the new family had to leave their country and go to Egypt as refugees, to escape the wrath and fear of Herod.⁵ Herod had every child in the area of Bethlehem under the age of two killed, trying to kill Jesus. This is called the Slaughter of the Innocents, and it was not an accident that I read that story after our children left for Sunday School.

Herod, you see, is afraid, “and all Jerusalem with him.” The one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power. The kind of servant leadership that God’s prophets called for is not characteristic of Herod or his court. The idea that God placed them in their positions to serve rather than be served does not even cross the royal mind. Herod worked hard to get to his current position as a Roman client-king, banishing one wife and child, executing another wife, you get the idea.⁶ His position and his life are threatened by even the mere mention of another – and therefore rival – king.

And that’s not even the real scary part. These *magi* and their seeking God’s Messiah means three things, all of them scary to someone invested in the Roman status quo:

- The world is changing.

³ Luke 2:24, Leviticus 12:6-8.

⁴ <http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1300/why-did-the-magi-consider-frankincense-and-myrrh-such-valuable-gifts>

⁵ Jamieson, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.xi.i.iii.html>.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

- God is approaching.
- And nothing will stay the same in the presence of God's Messiah.

These *magi*, wise people who are seeking wisdom from Galilee, signal to all who have eyes to see and ears to hear that the world is changing. "Insiders" and "Outsiders" are being eliminated as categories. God is broadening God's embrace to include everyone in God's plan for salvation.

This is not a new concept. When God called Abraham, he promised to bless him so that he, in turn, would be a blessing to all the nations of the world.⁷ But this, this is not promises and theory. This is God doing something concrete about what God has promised.

The racial and ethnic distinctions are disappearing in religion, as God is accepting foreign-born worshippers. "All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next."⁸

Fear is a powerful thing. Fear can make even the wise foolish, and reduce the powerful to a quivering mess. And there is little historical evidence of Herod being particularly wise before.

When Herod figures out that the *magi* have decided, upon reflection, not to point out the Messiah to his enemy, he overreacts in spectacular fashion. He does not send a servant or an investigator to find out what is going on here; he certainly does not go to

⁷ Genesis 18:17-19.

⁸ David Lose, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1509>

assess the situation for himself. No, he orders his soldiers to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old or younger.

Much later in the story, this Spring, we will hear how fear caused the political and religious leaders of the day to conspire against Jesus, and to capture and kill him. This is the kind of thing that fear can do.

What does this mean for us?

How does fear affect us?

Do we install more security systems? Do we build more gates or walls, or buy more guns? Do we hold more tightly to our money, pulling back from giving where it is needed, just in case we might not have enough later? Do we close our hearts and minds to those who are different or those who are telling us that change is coming?

Matthew's telling of the nativity story moves quickly from the *magi* and their adoration of the infant Jesus to a darker world of political intrigue, fear, deception, and brutal violence. There's a reason we read Luke on Christmas Eve.

But that darker world looks a lot like the world we hear about on television: the world of innocents slaughtered in school shootings, the world of bombings, the world of terror used as a weapon of war. The world where people are so fearful that we do unthinkable things to each other and to ourselves.

This is the kind of world that Jesus came into.

This is the kind of world that God decided was not too far gone to save.

This is the kind of world that Jesus chose to enter, to be Emmanuel, God with us.

Think about that for a moment.

God chose to appear, to be made manifest, not in a nice place, where he could have an easy time of things. No, God chose to be made manifest in a world like the one we live in, but worse. The truth is that our world today is far better than the world of the Roman Empire, but we hear about everything that goes wrong. We hear about everything that is bad, and that feeds the fears.

Everything that I said to the kids was true. We do bring our gifts to God when we share them with those in need. But the truth is that God loves us even when we do not: when we hoard what is “ours,” or covet what others have.

What the Incarnation, God coming to earth as Jesus Christ, means is that God sees into our hearts, sees everything that is there, and loves us anyway. Thanks be to God.

What the coming of the *magi* means is that:

- The world is changing.
- God is approaching.
- And nothing will stay the same in the presence of God’s Messiah.

That is the insight I promised you at the beginning, the epiphany. But there’s one more. The God who is approaching is the one who loves us so much, he came into this world, lived, died, and was raised for us.

And, as we enter a new year, I will quote the most frequently given command in the Bible.

“Do not be afraid.”

AMEN.