

Epiphany 2017
January 8, 2017
First United Church of Christ, Northfield
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“Home by Another Way”

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 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.

Our Christmas story tells us of a God who created the universe, then interrupted into it, and never completely disentangled from creatures. Call him Father, call her Sophia/Wisdom, call them Trinity-creator, redeemer, sanctifier. But recognize the Divine when It comes. She comes to *human* creatures certainly, as attested in Scriptures around the world - but also I am sure to *other* creatures in ways I pray we'll be able to read one day if we listen empathetically and scientifically enough. What if on this celebration of epiphany- of revelation- of startling contact- we could meet the God in all kinds of ways? In the pine forests of northern MN or what if your dog has been preaching all long as you suspect? What if in this season where we claim God dipped into human child form we listen for the gospel entrusted to human children, before our painful world has shaken it out of them? And what if we, who gather around them, profess their Wisdom Incarnate?

We have such hope when we hear about those wise magician kings from the east who journey by star- back when the stars were still so brilliant to behold. Before Menards and Kwik Trip parking lot lights took precedent over the night sky and its messages. We celebrate today when those sages bring aromatic precious gifts to lay before a powerless

and yet potentially cosmic force the world has little room for. We always assume there were three, since we hear about three gifts, but truly the text doesn't say so. Our fellow Christians in Syria, for instance, count 12 magi. Maybe there was a whole caravan. Or maybe there were just two and they couldn't narrow down the gift list. We're sure, though, when we hear about them, that we'd be like them. In this story, we're the magi for sure. We behold that infant lowly and intuit our way to the fierce and wily Force behind the babe.

The wise gurus from the east capture our imagination. They get the cool costumes in the kids' pageants, with the bling and the crowns. They are astrologers and savvy dessert travelers. They read the skies for portents about events that will change political borders and philosophies and life on earth. They also hail from the region that had destroyed the Israelites, our spiritual ancestors of the past. You know, the ones who brought the utter destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the center of community, piety, worship promised to the children of Abraham. This time they come not as a destructive force to obliterate the holy places, but as envoys in supplication and reverence and worship. The fire in the heavens draws them to a land rife with political unrest. Roman occupation, the tracking of people who must register in a census- what we might speak of as "undocumented".

The author we call Matthew is the only one who tells us this episode. Other gospels either didn't think it was relevant or didn't know the legend. His gospel was one of the most widely used in the early churches and presents Jesus as a teacher; he parallels 5 discourses or teachings with the 5 foundational books of the Torah. He's familiar with Palestine and doesn't feel the need to explain all the stories from the Hebrew Bible. His is a polarized Jewish world of many sects. For him, you either walk in the way of righteousness or you don't. Not a lot of soft middle ground here. His genealogy is full of righteous exception, especially the women with the odd stories, Tamar, Ruth, Bathsheeba. He is challenging us to be among those who choose righteousness and he makes the stakes high, life and death. Probably he wrote after the second Temple destruction in 70 CE. That's when the Romans squashed political rebellion by destroying the Temple the people had worked so hard to restore after those first invaders from Babylon trounced it. It had just been completed and set up as a major pilgrimage site, bringing in lots of visitors. There was still the historical memory of how this minority people had launched a guerilla war against an impressive Greek regime and that had miraculously won! A ragtag bunch of fighters who were annually commemorated for the miraculous way they and their symbols of divine connection persevered. Hanukah reminded these people that sometimes God's power inverts human power directly, not just symbolically, but politically. Roman overlords wanted none of this. So they destroyed the Temple in Matthew's lifetime. But here, wisemen

from a land that had previously conquered righteous Israel, well they came not to destroy but to honor. They come because the universe told them to.

So this time the threat is not from the outside political force. The bad guy in this round of stories, the threat that pervades the occupied zone, comes from within the people of God. A leader who has a foot in his own community and a foot in collusion with the Roman overlords. The narrator looks back to that period of Jesus' life, roughly a generation earlier, and tells us of Herod. Herod is remembered as brutal; he's said to have killed his own family to reach and maintain his office. When noble travelers come from far away to recognize a leader so powerful the very heavens portend his birth, Herod surely thinks that should be him. So Herod does not rejoice with them. And his menacing power haunts the pageantry of the kings' visit.

We call today Epiphany, we hope for an epiphany, an aha moment! a shazaam! an oh my God! And it is true that we get one. We enter the house (no stable in his account) and see Mary with the child. We pray to behold the power of Incarnate Love in our world, but we also hear something disturbing. That even while Love manifests itself, Destruction threatens. They're warned, those kings- go home by another way, and so are we.

The lectionary (or schedule of bible readings) tastefully and abruptly breaks before we have to hear what a Herod in his world does with such regal admiration and worship. Jealously trying to maintain his own power at any expense, Herod sends orders to destroy all the male children 2 years old and under. So we have the beatific vision of Madonna and child and lurking behind it, we have slaughter of the innocents.

We're sure Herod is the villain and the child will miraculously survive. At least for now. We as listeners put ourselves in the manger scene. The live nativity. Standing, no kneeling before the Christ child. The utter possibility of hope rupturing the world. But the gospeller we call Matthew knows us. We read this with the easy assurance of those who know Herod is like the Pharaoh of old who tried to keep the ancestors enslaved but lost out to a stronger God of plagues - frogs, hail, blood red sacred rivers, and slaughter of first born innocents. A God who slaughtered Egyptian innocents but "passed over" God's own people. So now Herod as petulant ruler renown for his savage treatment of rivals uses the slaughter of the least among them to demonstrate his power. But we who are gathered around the house say God rescued US surely from such a fate and true power is elsewhere. We're with the rescued infant Jesus.

But I'm thinking we're not supposed to see ourselves only as the gathered worshipful ones. I'm thinking inserting this story of Herod within a gospel and incarnation invites

us, okay forces us, to consider our moments of being Herod. Entrusted with the liberation story of our people, do we nonetheless in moments of insecurity collude with Rome at the expense of the vulnerable?

So there are two fears in this gospel. One, the fear/awe of a mighty God and how we can encounter that God. It will blow our minds, redirect our path, and set us on a journey that may reverse everything we know. That's a good, if daunting, kind of fear. The other fear, is that we are more like Herod than the wise sages. Even though we are intertwined with God and diligently seek the child, epiphany is always married to threat. The greatest moments of insight, the greatest epiphanies of Love, come at great cost. They are not always welcomed by those around us. They are not always welcomed by us. So if today I am one of the magi, I am always at risk tomorrow of being Herod. How do we handle the power of a God of radical love and peace, that interrupts our assumptions about righteousness and justice?

So on this Epiphany tide, maybe we can take some brave time to look at where the heavens are pointing us. Will the star lead us to the receding polar ice caps? To an indigenous child near the proposed pipeline? Or as my friend's posts among Christians in Lebanon this Christmas showed me, amidst lush fruits and dates at table, but also amidst robbed churches and bereft Syrian refugees? And how will we handle the power? We desperately want to be those wise magi who are wise enough, and inspired enough, to perceive the real threat and therefore go home by another way.

They don't ditch their journey, even having been warned. They presumably take their overwhelming encounter with the Christchild out into their lands. They spread a message of a God who is not solely fickle or uninterested, but pointedly engaged and integrated with human tribes. A God who dares to be vulnerable amidst a world of destruction. They recognize that all Wisdom comes at a price. We might need to be as wily as our God to embrace this kind of teaching and go home by another way. We beg to leave our Herod behind, but in order to do that, we have to first recognize our tendencies to be so fearful of this power of God that we destroy it. By making this double edge nature of true Power- Destruction/Life- **I think this Epiphany tale gives us the very Wisdom it takes to navigate a broken world in the way of a righteous Power of Love.** We'll be wary of our inner Herod, and the Herods among us. But we'll go to the Christ child and his mother. Continually. Our task is to recognize the Epiphany amidst us, and avoid the devastating force we always carry at the same time. It's to identify with those who may have been our enemies in the past, but who teach us to follow a wondrous star to the Prince, a powerful of Prince of Peace.