

Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany 2023)

Celebrating the birth of Jesus gives us an incredible opportunity to begin again, to a life of transformation of ourselves as well as the world. We can be instruments of that transformation. Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, the revealing of Jesus as Christ to the Gentiles, historically a transformation of the world.

In contrast to Luke's beloved manger scene, significant time, approximately two years, has passed between Jesus' birth and the Magi visit. The shepherds are back at work; Mary, Joseph and Jesus are now in a house, having left the stable.

Matthew's sublime story of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars whose microscopic analysis has often missed its essence. The difference is one of attitude. The poet and artist approach scripture with wonder and affection, with the heart. The scholar approaches scripture systematically and analytically, with the head. Both heart and head have their place, but today's story shows how Christ enriches those who bring him their hearts. The Magi came with joy in their hearts to see the Christ child, and God allowed them to see something wondrous.

There are two ways to tell the story of the Magi; one shaped for the ears, hearts, and imagination of children as experienced by our traditional Christmas pageants; and then there is the version better suited to adults. Placing the Magi in the manger on Christmas Eve misses how far God

reaches to ensure that all people, whoever and wherever they are, receive the Good News of Christ's birth.

While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were kings, nowhere else are three Wise Men portrayed as kings. And there isn't really a reason to believe there were three of them. There were three different gifts, but nowhere does it number the men. This is not a grand theological point, but reminds us of how often we read our versions into Scripture, and how difficult it can be to unpack centuries of traditions. Many legends, songs, and art have been built around these mysterious men with their gifts. Almost all of it is speculation.

A more precise description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. The Western Christian Church has assigned them the names; Melchior (Babylonian scholar), Caspar (Persian scholar), and Balthazar (Arab scholar). This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which at that time was highly regarded as a science.

So these Wise Ones from the East were scientists who practised other religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ child. More ironic, God used these scientists who practised other religions, to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people in on the news that **their Messiah** had been born. The Magi were practitioners of "pagan religions". Their beliefs would have been dismissed as superstitious, if not evil, by most Jews of the day, in the same way that such beliefs

concerning the role of stars in human fate – astrology – eventually came to be dismissed by orthodox Christians.

God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace **all** people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star, and to the political and religious authorities of God's own people through visitors from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace.

God's radical grace is wondrously frightening. It causes one to shudder to think of the implications of portraying the Magi as scientists who practised another religion, because to do so pushes us to expand our understanding of both the ways God reaches out to people to announce good news in and through Christ – and what it means for individuals to have faith and for gatherings of the faithful to be church.

The Magi did not come looking for the Christ through preaching, liturgy, sacrament, a welcoming congregation, or a vital social ministry – things we all hold dear. They came seeking the Christ child after studying the night skies. As people who hold onto favourite cherished ways that God works to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith, it's always wondrously

frightening to realize anew that God's own work of embracing all people is more "mystery" than "formula" because God's ways are always bigger than our understanding. God is always reaching out to embrace us in new ways.

Matthew's numberless Magi, or astrologers, arrive without camels in silence. They shine the light of their wisdom on Herod and share their only conversation with him. They turn down his requests to accompany them and refuse to give Herod the location of the Christ child on their return journey. But, there is another element of this story that often gets overlooked. That is the fear and opposition that Jesus' birth brings. This is the adult version!

Herod does not greet news of a newborn king with joy. Herod is afraid, and not just Herod, but "all of Jerusalem with him". The one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power. We need to consider carefully how the story lumps "all Jerusalem" with King Herod, as if all the citizens of this city were Herod's allies, fully in support of his tyrannical reign. We know from historical sources that many Jews resented and resisted Herod's alliance with Roman Caesar, including many Jerusalemites.

Surely some of the people of Jerusalem would have been hopeful, rather than frightened, by the appearance of the Magi, longing as they were for a different political configuration in the holy city. We need to be careful not to lump an entire people as being of one mind – of stereotyping. Matthew was more likely referring to the Jerusalem elite - the scribes, the priests and the Pharisees - as "all Jerusalem" ... in other words, all the power holders.

The adult version of Matthew's nativity moves quickly from the glad moment of the adoration and gifts of the Magi to a darker, more ambivalent world of political intrigue, deception, and fear-induced violence. But, if Matthew's account is more sober, it is also realistic.

We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating super-storms and elementary school massacres, a world where innocents die everyday of preventable illness and hunger. We see this reaction to fear in Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi – and the subsequent slaughter of the innocents in the following verses. Matthew renders an accurate if difficult picture of the world.

Whereas the pagan Magi worshipped the baby Jesus, Herod of Rome tried to kill him. He had, after all, murdered his own sons, one of his wives, and countless opposition. We don't normally see the birth of a baby as a threat to political power, but Matthew does. His political parody is transparent. Herod sensed a threat to his power, so he tried to exterminate it.

Matthew contrasts two rival kings who rule not only over the people (the Jews), but over all the world. One king must give way. The subplot about King Herod almost overshadows the main plot of the adoration of the Magi.

And that is what is at the heart of Matthew's darker, more adult-oriented story of Jesus' birth: the promise that is precisely *this* world that God came to; *this* people, so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves, that God loves; *this* gaping need that we have and bear, that

God remedies. Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us, the living, breathing, and vulnerable promise that God chose to come live and die for us, as we are, so that in Christ's resurrection, we too might experience newness of life.

Perhaps Matthew sketches his story of Jesus' birth – and our lives – with darker strokes precisely so that we might perceive the glory and grace of God's redemption in Christ all the more clearly, kind of like a bright star shining high in the heavens and leading us to greet our Saviour and Lord.

Matthew does not shrink from telling us that the comings as well as the goings of God from this world are shrouded in violence, intrigue and destruction and require our courage, risk and following of small and unexpected lights to guide our ways.

Yet, Luke's more tranquil story of Jesus' birth: Mary's prophetic forecast that God will scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts, pull the mighty from their thrones and send the rich away empty - are all the things that Herod fears.

Perhaps it is the presence of these Magi and their quest for God's Messiah, announcing that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God's messiah, that forms the root of fear for Herod and the powerful. The arrival of these wondering astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is broadening considerably, that there is no longer "insider" and "outsider", but that all are included in God's plan for salvation.

This isn't a new theme in Judaism, as from the very beginning of the story - God promises to bless Abraham that he in turn may be a blessing for the world. But now it is happening – all distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions is dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

Matthew's gruesome gospel disillusioned us of all such Hallmark readings of the Bible. He yanks us back into the violent political realities "during the time of King Herod." The story of the pagan Magi worshipping Jesus ends abruptly when Herod slaughters innocent children in order to strengthen his rule.

After worshipping Jesus, the Magi returned to their countries. But God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, who had demanded that they come back with precise information. They disobeyed Herod and returned home "by another route".

Meanwhile, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus fled to Egypt to find protection. The political ironies in the flight to Egypt are significant. The infant Son of God fled as a displaced refugee to a foreign country, Egypt, Israel's sworn and symbolic enemy that had oppressed the Hebrews for 430 years. The place where Pharaoh had unleashed his own infanticide against the firstborn Israelite children became a refuge for the baby Jesus.

In the end, and as with the Egyptian Pharaoh, it was king Herod "the Great" who died, about 4 BCE. And just as the baby Moses survived Pharaoh's

mass murder, so too did the baby Jesus survive Herod's infanticide, becoming the "survivor baby". King Jesus returned to settle in the town of Nazareth in the district of Galilee, being careful to avoid Herod's son Archelaus who took his place.

We could make a good argument that we should save this story for another day, perhaps Lent might be more appropriate. But our songs of peace and public displays of charity have not erased the headlines of child poverty, gun violence, and even genocide. This is a brutal world. Today the victims are statistically less likely to be Jewish and more likely to be from Darfur, or Zimbabwe, or Sudan, or Afghanistan, or Ukraine. But the sounds of Rachel weeping for her children are not uncommon. If we could hear them, they would drown out our cheerful, tinny carols.

And yet, even if the story does not ring "true" by a certain set of historical criteria, it does lead us into reflection on very profound truths concerning our own experiences of the working of the world and of God in the world. Anyone who follows world events is no stranger to the phenomenon of political tyrants, who live in perpetual fear of losing power, and who think nothing of subjecting their own people to the cruelest exercise of that power.

If we are honest with ourselves, we may recognize that we, like the Magi, may engage in actions that ultimately work in the service of tyrannical power, even if we are sometimes too naive to recognize how our behaviours and decisions fuel that power. We may remember times in our own lives that we were keenly aware of the workings of divine providence - we might have

experienced our own version of the dream of the Magi - the word from God that kept us or our loved ones out of harm's way. But we also know that harm is not always providentially avoided. Our Christian faith is deeply rooted in our scriptures, our doctrine and our traditions, but sometimes we are guided by something more - something else - the light of a star that comes from not our familiar religious practice, but a light that still leads us onward.

Perhaps then our journeys are not so different from those of the Magi, with their turns sometimes into safely, sometimes into precarious territory. Sometimes we may need to ask for directions, sometimes divine guidance may be so obvious that we could not miss our destination. May we be as determined as the Wise Men in following all signs that lead to Christ.

May we be as savvy as they became to the threats to rid life in this world. May we be as willing to pay the Christ child homage in our lives. If ever in our lives our long journeys do lead us precisely to the place we have been seeking - to the place where we see the Christ, may we, like the Magi, also rejoice, becoming overwhelmed with our joy upon seeing him in our life.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE FOR EPIPHANY -- JANUARY 1, 2023

God of wonder and mystery, God of the stars and the universe, God of winding ways and straight paths, we gather today with gratitude for the gift of your constant presence, your trustworthy guidance, and your daring risk-taking with us. You dare to love us despite our inability to respond fully. You dare to care for us, despite our challenge in caring for others. You dare to walk with us, despite our fickleness.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

On our own journeys toward the stars and guiding points you put before us, you continue to lead us forward, guiding us by the teachings of Jesus to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in your loving shadow. We ask for your continued guidance as we look forward to the new year.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

As we struggle with the political wrangling of this world, the wars waged for both justice and greed, the violence committed daily against the innocent, you remain steadfast in your care and devotion for your entire creation throughout the universe. And even in our doubts and disbelief, and our struggle to understand your ways, you remain constantly present to us.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

We pray for peace in this world, Lord, the kind of peace in which we celebrate diversity, are joyfully challenged by adversity, and share in the joy that is to be found everywhere. We pray for those who are lonely, that you might lead us to reach out and be friends. We pray for those who are hungry, that you might lead us to offer sustenance. We pray for those who are lost, that you might lead us to give hope and direction.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

We pray for the nations of the world, that we might find a way to work together to lift one another up. We pray for our leaders in every country, that your Spirit might guide them to set an example for their country and the world to work together rather than against one another.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

God, as we move forward into a new year, we ask you to bless all who are not looking forward to it. We think of people who are ill or are living with a significant medical condition and are fearful of what the year will bring. We

think of those grieving the loss of someone in their lives in this past year. Comfort them with the knowledge that your love surrounds them in their sorrow. Fill them with your peace. We think of all who have family difficulties and strained relationships and are concerned as to how to resolve them. We think of all for whom the new year is bringing money problems; all who are fearful for security for their jobs; those who find themselves unemployed, or are in the process of seeking meaningful work.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

We pray for our church, that we may seek to build up this body and seek to repair the theological divisions that are tearing us apart. We pray for our bishops, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders, that they may continually seek your Spirit in their lives and their daily decisions. Help us to trust you more fully and to learn to discern together your will as you lead us into the future you are preparing for us as a congregation.

O God, **lead us by your light.**

And we pray for ourselves, that we might be faithful to continue on this lifelong journey of being your disciples, learning the lessons you offer, seeking the fullness of your glory and perfection, and living our lives as you would have us live. These prayers and hopes we offer in confidence and gratitude of your steadfast love and abiding presence.

Amen