

Matthew 2:1-23

Matthew, a rabbinic writer, gives us this extraordinary tale, so different from the rest of his gospel. Why? Is it the magi, the gifts, the star – or the escape to Egypt – that he wants us to remember? Matthew does not shrink from telling us that the coming, as well as the going, of God from God's world – are both shrouded in violence, intrigue and destruction, and require our courage, risk, and following of small and unexpected lights to guide our way.

The traditional interpretation of the gifts is: Gold: A gift for royalty, acknowledging that Jesus was of a Royal line. Frankincense: An expensive incense that was burned as part of worship in the Temple. This signifies Jesus' divinity. Myrrh: An expensive oil used for perfume. Myrrh was most commonly used among wealthy Jews as an anointing oil for the dead. So, myrrh is seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and a reminder of his mortality. While this explanation fits nicely into popular modern Christian theology, its historic merit is questionable. How would the strangers from the East have known Jewish ritual customs of the Temple? They certainly couldn't Google it.

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, to Magi via a star, and to the political and religious authorities of God's own people through shepherds and visitors from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's reach,

God's embrace in Jesus grows bigger and bigger and bigger. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace.

The Magi did not come looking for the Christ child 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. But, Herod did not see God's ever-expanding embrace. He felt threatened by it, giving way to fear. King Herod "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him".

Perhaps the presence of the Magi and their quest for the Messiah, announces that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God's Messiah. The arrival of these wondering astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is broadening, that all are included in God's plan for salvation. This isn't a new theme in Judaism. From the very beginning, God promises to bless Abraham that he may, in turn, be a blessing for the world.

Fear is a powerful thing. In response to their fear, Herod along with the

chief priests and scribes, conspire to find the Messiah and kill him. Our Epiphany story continues with the departure of the Magi and Herod's order to kill all the children two and under. Herod is determined to get rid of Jesus, and the threat to his kingship. But an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, warning him of Herod's plan, and once again, Joseph obediently listens to this angel and takes his family to Egypt.

While they were in Egypt, the horrific slaughtering of all male children two and under in and around Bethlehem took place. This is a heavy and difficult story to read just one week after Christmas. Matthew tells a story that is grittier, more disturbing, more realistic than one ending with the exotic, adoring Magi presenting their gifts, then quietly returning to Persia.

Christmas comes into the world "just as it is". Jesus is born, not into a perfect world, but into a world "just as it is". The Christmas story, with all its shadows and threats, gives it more power. The shadows and threats are just as real today. This grim account of wholesale massacre and night flight to safety would seem far-fetched were it not for similar atrocities and tragedies happening in our world today.

We are not unfamiliar with the slaughtering of children in world news, whether it's mass shootings in schools, or wars and conflicts. Thousands of Palestinian children have been killed in Gaza, including those living in a refugee camp, sacrificed to a war they did not start nor understand.

Babies in incubators in both Ukraine and Gaza have lost their lives. In Gaza, hospitals lack fuel to power incubators, medical supplies are lacking, and bombing does not stop. In Ukraine a hospital was bombed including a maternity ward with at least seven lives lost.

People are left with rubble where homes once stood in Gaza and Ukraine. Refugee numbers are growing day by day. Such are the harsh, cold realities of the world today. In Africa, the lack of food is responsible for the deaths of thousands of children, as Russia bars wheat-laden ships from Ukraine from delivering food to Africa.

Today is a day to remember not only the Babes of Bethlehem, but all the children who have been hurt and lost their lives, homes, families; destroyed by kings and kingdoms, governors and governments, by laws, by parents, by a society that does not care.

Perhaps this story can speak to our pain and grief and confusion about these modern day situations. What happens when absolute power goes unchecked? What happens when fear of the unknown drives decision-making? Jesus' birth upset the order. He comes as God's chosen king, the one who is to bring about peace, justice, and equity of the kingdom of God. And so all earthly kings and leaders who put their own power and privilege first are terrified. Herod is a good, but by no means lone, example. So terrified is he of the promise that, in this child, God will restore peace and justice, that he is willing to slaughter the infants of an

entire region. In the process of fearing others, the one who fears, seeks to douse the light of other lives.

The coming of Jesus didn't immediately eradicate sin from the world; his birth didn't stop horrible things from happening. But, his incarnation as an innocent infant does stand in sharp contrast to the corruption of the adult Herod. The promise of the incarnation is not that all difficulties will cease to exist, but that in the middle of them all, God is trying to do something completely different - not fighting power with power, but overcoming power by choosing weakness, not fighting violence with violence, but offering peace in its midst.

A child is born who will turn the world upside-down. The authorities seek to get rid of the threat, forcing the child's family to make a hasty retreat into exile. God's own son becomes a transient, homeless, migrant, alien. In time, the grownup baby says, "Foxes have holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Once a refugee, still a refugee. Consider the many families being dislocated in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and South America as they flee their Herods?

Amidst the carols, festivities and cuteness of Christmas, we miss something. Christmas, the Christ story in general, is revolutionary. In both Matthew and Luke, there are signs of the revolution, signs of the shadow that looms over the whole story. Jesus is born into the world, "just as it is". He is born to change that world, the world "just as it is". He

is born to herald the coming of the kingdom of God. Herod was threatened and so he struck back. And without a specific target, he cast a wide net. He did what those with power have always done. Power will always destroy the innocent in an effort to maintain and gain more power. There will always be a mysterious truth about the experience Emmanuel shared with us, and a mysterious truth about how a baby, a man on a cross, overcomes this evil. And there will always be the tension that we experience, even as we proclaim a feast of victory.

There is no easy answer, just faith and hope, a hope that Mary shares as she reflects on the unexpected and mysterious events of her life.

It's terrifying to attract the attention of a king, especially a king like Herod. I don't blame our visitors, strangers from Persia. It's no wonder they didn't know who they were dealing with when they went to Jerusalem asking to see the newborn king of the Jews.

They couldn't have known to what lengths Herod would go to maintain his power. This is a man who had his sons murdered, who ordered the death of his most beloved wife because he was afraid of her schemes to put one of her sons on his throne, the throne he held courtesy of the Romans. Now, Herod was no Jew. He was not in the line of David. Hearing that there was a king born in the line of David must have terrified him.

I admit it. I too was naive. The danger in the angel's words never occurred to me. "Son of the Most High, God will give him the throne of David." How could I miss the challenge to the powers that be in those words! I guess I just thought that God would keep us hidden until Jesus was old enough to reign. It's hard to think of swords and blood and death when you're feeling that first kick, when you're consumed by labour pains, when your newborn nestles in your arms.

But, there were swords and blood and death. As we fled to safety, warned by angels, soldiers devastated Bethlehem. How many dead? How many mothers and fathers died protecting their children? How many men gave their lives in a vain attempt to fight off this invasion of their homes? Had the soldiers crept quietly into town and torn people from their beds, herding them into the centre of the village like cattle to be slaughtered?

*All because one small family attracted the attention of a terrifying king! I had a lot of time to think of that along that long journey to Egypt. We would find a welcome in one of the Jewish communities on the banks of the Nile, far away from the reach of this deadly king. Egypt meant safety for us. The irony was not lost on me. We were fleeing **to** Egypt.*

Odd that this place of safety for us is the same place of slavery and danger we remember each Passover. There was a terrifying king there too, a king who feared Hebrew babies enough to send soldiers to rip them from their mother's arms as soon as they were born. It was a land

of swords and blood and death that we left behind for the land God promised to us. And now, Joseph and I, to save our son, are fleeing the Promised Land, desperately trying to outrun death.

The news of the massacre caught up to us on the road. I fell to my knees at the news, crying out in anguish. I thought of the women I chatted with at the well every morning, of their toddlers playing next to Jesus as we talked together, worked together, celebrated together. My family! My friends! I clutched Jesus close to me as I cried, as if I could protect him from danger and tragedy. And I wept for the children, just as Rachel wept for her children as they went into exile.

The sorrow followed us. We lived quietly in Egypt. We were safe, but for how long? The sound of soldiers' feet always sent me scurrying to grab my son, to hide him once again. Joseph was careful, travelling to a far-off city each time we needed to exchange the Magi's gold for the smaller coins peasants like us could be expected to have. We never talked about Bethlehem, saying we were from Nazareth. It was true, even if it hid the terrible truth.

We never talked about angels, or dreams, or shepherds, or Magi, except very late at night, when we could whisper in each other's ears, confident that Jesus was safely asleep, and there were no other listening ears to betray our secret.

Finally, Joseph had another dream. Herod was dead and it was safe to

return. I dreaded it, the fear never left me. How could we go back to our home in Bethlehem, with our strong little boy, knowing that the children he once played beside were dead? It was such a relief when Joseph told me about another dream, instructing us that the danger, just as I feared, was not past. Herod's son was just as terrifying as his father and we should return to Nazareth instead. It was a relief, yet filled with dread. Is this what our life would be like? Always looking over our shoulder? Always on the run? Always ready to follow whatever God had in store for us?

It's been quiet since we returned to Nazareth. Nazareth has always been a quiet village. Slowly we let down our guard, let go of our fears. It's only late at night, when I dream about Bethlehem's children, that I relive the terror. Those memories are never far from my mind. And I fear for him. What will happen when he is old enough to claim his throne?

Last Sabbath, the portion of scripture read in the synagogue was from the prophet Jeremiah, the same words that came to me when I first heard the terrible news from Bethlehem - Rachel weeping for her children for they are no more. That day, prostrate in the dust, crying inconsolably, I could not remember the rest of the prophet's words: "This is what the Lord says: 'A cry is heard in Ramah, deep anguish and bitter weeping. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for her children are gone.' But now this is what the Lord says: 'Do not weep any longer, for I will reward,' says the Lord. 'Your children will come back to you from the distant land of the enemy. There is hope for your future,'"

says the Lord. 'Your children will come again to their own land.'"

I looked from the women's section of the synagogue over to my son, worshipping next to Joseph. Hope for the future, that's what was promised. That's what this boy, fast becoming a man, will bring, hope for the future. For now, he is the living, breathing proof that God had not forgotten us, that God is with God's people, that God is with us today. And that is enough!

So, Matthew tells this dark, gritty, terror-filled, difficult story, to let us know that in Jesus, God did indeed draw near to us, God took on our lot in our life, and experienced and endured all that we endure; disappointment, fear, violence, even death, all so that we would know that we are not alone, that we do not suffer alone, fear alone, live and die alone.

Sometimes life is beautiful and wonderful and filled with goodness and grace. And God is a part of that, giving blessing and celebrating with us and for us. And sometimes life is hard, gritty, disappointing and filled with heartache. And God is part of that as well, holding on to us, comforting us, blessing us with the promise that God will stay with us through the good and the bad, drawing us ever more deeply into God's loving embrace and promising that nothing, not even death, will separate us from the love of God.

God is not only with the characters of this story, God is also with us, holding onto us through the joys and sorrows, working through the triumphs and tragedies that attend our lives, all to share the news of the salvation God has brought in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But, Jesus' story is even bigger than that. It echoes all of God's Big Story, God's Great Story of God's relationship with humanity. Matthew goes out of his way to highlight this. Like Moses, the baby Jesus is almost killed by a malicious leader. Like Moses, Egypt becomes a place of exile, but also safety. Like Moses, the "delivered one" becomes the deliverer, and God's power to save is greater than evil's power to destroy.

From prolonged family crises to financial fears to a haunting sense of uncertainty, grief is a real reality even during the Christmas season. Yet, wherever we find ourselves, we are never off God's radar. God has been there before! Even in the land of the loss, even in faraway Egypt, nothing is new to God.

This story matters because it tells us the truth; difficult truths of unjust rulers and violence; private grief and personal pain; and all the rest. We are left with the hopeful truth that God has not stood back at a distance, but in Jesus has joined God's own self to our story and is working, even now, even here, to grant us new life that we may not just endure, but

flourish, experiencing resurrection, joy, and courage in our daily lives and sharing our hope with others.

So, here we are, at the start of a new year with bitter sweet memories behind us, and in our hearts we hold a Christmas story, a bizarre story, with foreign tyrants and heavy taxes, swords and bloodshed, and innocent suffering and homeless holy refugees.

And remarkably, prayerfully, God somehow uses this collage of odd images to fulfill a commitment to us. Stated simply, *with our grief in one hand, and our gratitude in the other, we ask God's big promise to never leave us or forsake us.*

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 Christ, may we like the Magi, also rejoice, becoming overwhelmed with our joy upon seeing him in our life.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR DECEMBER 31, 2023

Nurturing God, remembering the exile of the holy family and Herod's slaughter of the children, we pray for all who are in need of your sustaining love. Hear our prayers for the church, the universal community of your faithful people, and the ongoing petition for peace, harmony and wholeness in the world.

God our shepherd, we pray for your whole Creation, especially this earth we share, including the waters and air we rely on for life; for rain in areas affected by drought; for sun in flooded lands; and for hope for restoration of livelihoods and rebuilding of communities in places suffering from natural disasters.

O God, you provide us with daily bread for our lives through your living Word. We pray for all those who are cold and hungry. Fill all who hunger with your gracious provision. Establish justice in the ways that food is grown and distributed. Work through agencies such as Lutheran World Relief to feed all your people. We pray for those far from home and those without homes. We pray for those experiencing spiritual and emotional hunger. Bring life giving nourishment through the lovingkindness of others.

O God, Ease the suffering of all who live with chronic illness, substance use disorder, distress, mental illness, or physical challenges.

Gracious God, we continue to pray for the people of Israel and Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and all nations in conflict or at war. We pray for those who are fleeing their homes; grant them a safe passage. We pray for those who have lost loved ones; be their comforter. We pray for those who are still being held hostage; let them experience freedom. O God, you are the Prince of Peace – bring peace to your world. As politicians and nations consider the next steps at the beginning of this new year, move them to set aside political agendas and differences and work together towards lasting peace. Help them be aware of the suffering of all people and respond with mercy and justice.

Righteous God, make your ways known to all nations. Join all people together, young and old, rich and poor, in order to work your righteous acts among them. Draw near to all children, sisters and brothers of Jesus. Free the young and vulnerable ones who are in chains of abuse, poverty, or neglect. Give them abundant life.

We pray for our bishops Susan and Kathy, for Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, all pastors, priests, deacons, councils and musicians. Today we uplift Benediction Lutheran Church in Delta and Pr. Thomas Keeley, King of Life Lutheran Church in Coquitlam and Pr. Dorothy Chu.

O God, our bright morning star, we thank you for the saints who have made their final journey home to you. Remembering your covenant that draws the saints into one community, join our voices with theirs in praise of all the good things you have blessed us with, and for all you have done for your people around the world during this past year. Grant that all people may with one heart sing together the song of joy as they approach the new year. Give strength to us whose journey through this life on earth is not yet completed. God of light, may we draw strength, rest, comfort, and nourishment by daily abiding in your presence in all the circumstances of our lives. In the year ahead guide us to discern your will and equip us to be co-creators with you in bringing your kin-dom near where all may experience the fullness of life, which is your will for all.

O God, shine your favour on your people and uphold us with the abundance of your steadfast love. Send us out from our places of worship, trusting in your presence, strengthened and equipped to announce the good news of your abiding love for all peoples in the coming of Jesus, the Christ, our source of hope and love.

Amen.

God is with us, and so we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us ...

Our Father ...