

2 Christmas, Yr. A
January 5, 2020
Matthew 2:1-12

As with the Christmas story, the Epiphany story can be told on two levels. We all know the child level, remembering it fondly from our own childhood, or from that of our children and grandchildren. Or maybe we remember it from numerous pageants with three kids, usually dressed up in bathrobes, playing the part of the kings. And, just as we talked about wonder at the Christmas sermon, there's plenty of wonder here as well, exotic animals, and equally exotic gifts brought by exotic people. People who had the star of wonder in their eyes.

These kings, or astrologers, or wise men, appear only in this short passage. We don't know much about them other than they came from the east. I had a telephone call from a colleague wondering how we handled the crèche – whether we took the shepherds out because they were gone when the kings arrived. Technically, I suppose we shouldn't even have the stable because one version of the story is that the kings arrived later, when the family was no longer in that stable in Bethlehem. You'll note that Matthew doesn't say that they were kings or that there were three of them. He says they were wise men and that they brought three gifts.

Not too long ago, an Episcopal scholar, working on his doctoral dissertation at Harvard, spent seven years translating an 8th century Syrian text. He wrote a book about it, of course, and said that the Magi were an ancient mystical sect descended from Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. Apparently, in Syriac, the word Magi means “to pray in silence” and has no relationship to magicians or astrologers. That text names 12 Magi, and other parts of the text suggest that “a group the size of a small army” traveled to Bethlehem. I guess one good thing about that latter piece of information is that one wouldn't have to restrict the number of kids who wanted to be kings! More traditionally, Magi are seen positively as philosophers or those who studied the natural sciences. But they are also described negatively as soothsayers, fortune tellers, sorcerers. To a Jewish reader, coming from a tradition that condemned such things, they

would have been the ultimate outsiders. One commentator said that they would be seen as “dabblers in chicken gizzards, forever trotting off here or there in search of some key to the future.” An astrophysicist has speculated that they were Zoroastrian astrologers and that what they saw was an alignment of planets, sun and moon. Coming from that tradition, searching the skies, watching the stars, was an honorable profession. The stars were in fixed courses, representing the order of the universe. So if there was some new star or new phenomenon, it was thought that God was breaking into the natural order. Roman historians recorded that there was, in the ancient world at that time, the belief that it was fated that men from Judea would emerge to rule the world. Given that, it’s more than probable that these men would have been learned in the Hebrew Scriptures and willing to set out on their journey.

What’s surprising, then, at least according to Matthew, is that Herod and his resident priests and scholars didn’t seem to know about this. We’ve talked before about Herod being paranoid. He’d been in power for a long time, from 40 BC to the time of Christ’s birth. The Romans trusted him; he’d kept the peace in Palestine for a long time. He was the one responsible for the rebuilding and enlarging of the temple. It’s said that he could be generous, remitting taxes in economically difficult times and once even melting down his gold plate to buy corn for the starving population. But that paranoia was his great flaw. He was ruthless in getting rid of anyone he thought threatened his power – that included his wife and mother-in-law and three of his sons. It’s said that he even arranged, when he hit 70, to have a large number of notable citizens imprisoned so that, upon his death, they would all be executed and therefore, the occasion of his death would be a cause for mourning.

So when Matthew says that when the wise men showed up asking where the child born King of the Jews was, that Herod was “frightened and all Jerusalem with him” you catch the reason why the whole city would be frightened – they knew what Herod was capable of. So they pandered and flattered; telling him only what he wanted to hear. One wonders about the wise men asking for the new king in the presence of this tyrant. They would have known that power once held is difficult, if not impossible, to

relinquish. But they figured out what Herod was about and so, as the text says, rather than returning to him, they went home “by another way.”

So they find the baby and bring in their gifts. Surely here Matthew takes his cue not only from the Hebrew scriptures but also from the very nature of the gifts and the child who was to receive them. Gold, a gift for a King. Frankincense, a gift for a priest. The function of the priest was to open the way to God for humans, to be a bridge between heaven and earth. Surely that was the work of Christ; hence the frankincense. And finally the myrrh, which was used to embalm the dead - foretelling the offering Christ would make of his life and his death.

Just as we did with the Christmas story, we can ask ourselves about the deeper message behind Matthew’s story. It’s been said that this reading contains Matthew’s entire Gospel. Perhaps we could see it that way. First of all there’s the incarnation – the manifestation of who God is and how much he loves us. Then, with the arrival of these outrageously outsider Gentiles, there’s the message, once heard by Abraham, but perhaps forgotten, that the Messiah, the Christ, is not for Israel alone, but for all the world. The text also points to the nature of power – the power of God, which is about love and sacrifice and vulnerability over and against the power of humans where it can be clung to, defended at all costs, often used for the wrong purposes. You may remember that Herod figures out that the child is to be born in Bethlehem and when he figures that out, he sends his soldiers to slaughter all the infant boys – he’ll be rid of the threat to his power using whatever means he has to. So, power. How God uses it and how humans can misuse it. And then, of course, there’s the whole idea of gift-giving and generosity. First in God’s giving of himself, which can never be matched and which we struggle to understand and appreciate. And then there are the gifts of the wise men. And then there’s our own gift-giving, which is an imitation of those gifts. Gift-giving is a practice that makes the invisible visible - God’s love is made manifest, enfleshed, present in this child and our love which we try to make visible through our own gift-giving. Some of the stories we share are about that giving: The Drummer Boy, or the Gift of the Magi. I recently saw the new rendition of Little Women. You may remember in that story that Jo cuts

and sells her beautiful hair to help pay for the train ticket for her mother to visit her father. Making love visible.

But finally, and perhaps most importantly, the message that Christ's mission was to bring the love of God to ALL, without exception. As the supreme reconciler, he was about breaking down all the barriers humans so easily put up. You can see those barriers falling and differences being erased in the story. As we said at Christmas, these scriptures erase the boundaries between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor. The shepherds were close by and came with clear directions at the behest of a choir of angels; the wise men came who knows how far without clear direction from a mute star – but they all got there in the end.

And finally, there are all the ideas about LIGHT. Christ the light that comes into the world to enlighten us as to the nature of God and the way we're supposed to live. And, just as the Jews are meant to be the light to the rest of the world, those who gather at the manger and understand the message they've heard and the gift they've been given, are to go out into the world, to BE the light and to spread the good news. That's us.

And finally, one more word about stars and light and the wonder which fits here as well as at Christmas. From David Duncan, who reminds us that we are made of the same stuff of the stars and tells about a telescope aimed at the darkest part of space that took 276 exposures over 10 days to gather as much distant light as possible. This resulted in a photo of layers not of stars, but of layers of galaxies, literally thousands of them in this single image. And from Teilhard de Chardin, talking about incarnation, about matter being suffused by spirit:

By means of all created things, without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, where in fact we live steeped in its burning layers.

We live in a wonder-filled, God-saturated universe. Like the wise men, we find that the only appropriate response is worship. Amen.