

Jan. 6, 2019

Matthew 2: 1-16

Prayer: Dear Lord, We welcome you into our Epiphany service, that day in which we celebrate the world's acknowledgment of you. May all the world come to know who you are. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Two-Part Epiphany

Finally, finally it is time for the wise men.

The Christmas that many of us celebrated 12 days ago had much more to do with the wise men bearing gifts than with the shepherds and angels who heralded Jesus' birth. We think the tradition of gift-giving began with the wise men who brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus' house.

But like the gift-giving that has gotten so out of hand, the story, too, has taken on a life of its own. Even the song we just sang, *We Three Kings*, falls into the trap.

We don't know that these men were kings. We don't even know there were three. All the gospel writer Matthew tells us is they were wise men or *magoi* in the original Greek.

But writers in the Middle Ages took this story and ran with it. They decided there were three wise men because they brought three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. They gave them names – Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchoir. And they even gave them exotic kingdoms to rule – India, Arabia and Persia.

By the 1800s in England and America, many churches celebrated the 12 days of Christmas which began on Christmas Day and ended with Epiphany, the “aha” moment when the coming of the wise men signaled Jesus’ recognition by the world.

People in the Episcopal church, especially, hung gifts and treats for children on the Christmas tree. The children opened those gifts when the tree was taken down on Epiphany, January 6. The children opened their gifts in memory of the gifts the wise men brought to the baby Jesus.

In 1857, a young man named John Henry Hopkins was working as a reporter for the *Church Journal* in New York City. Mr. Hopkins was very smart. He graduated from college, law school and seminary. He was an ordained Episcopal priest who chose to write rather than preach.

If I’d lived in the 19th century, I would have married John Henry.

In my absence, John Henry Hopkins was a bachelor. And as Epiphany approached early in 1857, he didn’t know what to get for his nieces and nephews. He didn’t know what to hang on their Christmas tree for them to open on January 6.

So he decided to write them a song. He went to the gospel of Matthew and chose this bare-bones story of wise men coming to visit the baby Jesus. He then combined it with folklore and traditions that had been passed down through 18 centuries.

He made the wise men kings and he made them three. He imagined their perilous trip from afar. And he imagined what each gift might have meant – gold to represent a kingly crown.

Frankincense to represent divinity because it was the perfume used in the Holy of Holies in the book of Exodus.

Myrrh because it was a bitter perfume used in burials, thus introducing the idea that this Messiah would die.

He wrote about each of these gifts that the wise men brought, forecasting Jesus' death with the verse on myrrh:

*Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone cold tomb.*

In only five verses, Hopkins told the entire story of Jesus' life, ending with his resurrection.

*Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Sounds through the earth and skies.*

When he had finished this amazing carol – part Scripture, part legend – John Henry Hopkins gave it to the youngest members of his family. It was a way for them to remember the true meaning of Epiphany – even if it weren't all necessarily true.

Let's turn in our Bibles to **Matthew 2**. We're going to read the first 12 verses to see what the Bible really says about these wise men from the East who acknowledged the divinity of a Jewish king. This is Part 1 of our Epiphany story.

And we're going to see how it foreshadows Part 2.

If you'd like to read along, we're in **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, ²asking, '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.'

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "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." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.'

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

See? No kings. Just wise men.

Most scholars think the term *magoi* refers to astrologers. And the fact that they are following a star seems to bear this out.

But I think we make a mistake if we get too bogged down in the literalness of this story or in a search for the identity of these star-gazing visitors. For there is more at work here.

There is more going on.

And it is foreshadowed by that line in verse 3: **“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him....”**

Foreshadowing, of course, is a much practiced literary device. I just finished reading a book by the British writer Ruth Ware. *The Lying Game* opens with a brief passage on the beach in which a dog digs up ... something.

So even when the first chapter begins with a woman in London, you know she’s somehow involved in whatever that dog dug up on that far away beach.

That's foreshadowing. And it's a great device that's used in almost every book, not just mysteries. *Including the book of Matthew.*

Because that hint in verse 3 -- **“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...”** – is fulfilled in verses 13-16.

If you stop reading at verse 12, you don't see the result of the foreshadowing. And that result is a terrible murder worse than anything Ruth Ware could dream up.

That's why I think we always need to read the final four verses. Part 2. The rest of the story.

Reading from **Matthew 2: 13-16:**

13 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.'

¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

16 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.

Part 1 of the Epiphany tells a glorious story of foreign visitors who acknowledge the arrival of the Jewish Messiah.

Part 2 tells just how dangerous his arrival is.

Herod was so frightened – of being outmaneuvered, of being dethroned, of being replaced – that he killed all the babies in Bethlehem under 2 years old in an attempt to kill Jesus.

What strikes me most about Matthew's story is its skillful intertwining of light and dark, of hope and dread, of joy and danger. For there are no wise men ... without Herod.

There is no holy family safe in Bethlehem ... without them on the run to Egypt.

There is no baby Jesus ... without the massacre of other babies in Bethlehem.

Just as John Henry Hopkins' song about Christmas talks about Jesus' execution and burial, so does the gospel of Matthew talk about terrible danger in the story of his birth.

This is no milquetoast Messiah. This Messiah brings danger and resistance to the ruling powers of the day. Then and now.

And I would contend that more often than not, it is foreshadowed by fear. Exactly as this story tells us.

Fear led to Herod's execution of the babies of Bethlehem.

Fear led to separating families and imprisoning children at our border, a situation that has led to two children's deaths while in American custody. So far.

We are almost always at our worst when we operate out of fear.

During the week of Christmas, a mentally impaired homeless man broke a policewoman's jaw as police tried to arrest him. WYFF-TV came to my house on Christmas Eve to do a story. The reporter's question was, "Are homeless people violent?"

I thought that was such a strange question. I told him I read in *The Greenville News* every single day about two to six shooting deaths across the state. All of those people have houses. Do we ask, "Are people who live in houses more likely to shoot each other"?

It's the same thing when an undocumented immigrant kills someone. Our president takes to Twitter in a rage while the tens of thousands of gun deaths at the hands of our own citizens go unaddressed. That number was 56,000 last year.

We are almost always at our worst when we operate out of fear.

Wise men from the East once came to Jerusalem. **"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."**

The people to whom this Messiah was foretold, was promised, were frightened of him from the very beginning. And in this story, it is strangers from the East who kneel before him, who pay him homage.

Meanwhile, Herod, the half-Jewish ruler of Jerusalem, plots his assassination.

It is Matthew's way of laying the foundation for a Messiah who would be for all people, for Jew and Gentile alike.

Luke gave us a smaller story in a tiny village in Judea, in which Jesus' birth was witnessed only by local shepherds. But Matthew's story opens up geographically by bringing in strangers from far away to bear witness to this God-come-to-earth.

From the very beginning, from the very birth of Jesus, outsiders are welcome to worship this Messiah. If they desire, he will be their king.

If we desire, he will be our king.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, East and West, North and South. And just as it was in the time of Herod, it is intertwined with danger today, too.

For it is always dangerous to challenge the status quo, whether it's a fearful king or a fear-mongering president.

Our two-part Epiphany shows us that the gospel has *always* taken root in the midst of danger, in the midst of darkness.

That's where the light can be most apparent.

Amen.