

2nd Sunday in January 2015

Today, the second Sunday after Christmas we gather to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord—a feast celebrating the manifestation of his divine nature to the Gentiles through the presence of the Wise Men, led by a cosmic event, represented by the star. So begins the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ to us.

Biblical scholars generally accept the Gospel of Mark as being the oldest of the Gospel accounts. But the Gospel of Matthew, going back to the Early Church Father's was considered the First Gospel. The first, because it "supplied both the frame and the basic shape and color of the church's image of Jesus Christ (K. Stendahl)." Our lectionary is fond of Matthew's account because of the depth of his story-telling and the fact that the other writers do not privilege the same details. The Gospel of Matthew has the three wise men journeying across the desert, the celestial sign leading to the new born king, the remarkable gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and the scheming by a despotic ruler. These details are all exotic; they are evocative details that capture our imagination.

Much of the birth story of Jesus and his early years are starkly unique to Matthew. There are no sheep or donkeys or shepherds or troops of angels adorning the manger scene like in Luke's account. Besides the details just mentioned that are unique to this Gospel— we also get the massacre of the infants by Herod and the flight of the Holy family with child into the wilderness of Egypt. Our Christmas Eve pageant, which many of you witnessed, is a blend of the birth narrative from both Luke and Matthew, excluding the unsavory bits. The birth story by Matthew has a great deal of imagery and examples of human behavior that stick with us.

Yet we can find our self, lost in the details of this story—the visitors from the East, the following of the brilliant star, to the fear of Herod the Great. But there is an important sub-text that Matthew reveals here. Matthew has not set out to just document the incredible event of our Lord's birth; early on in the Gospel he is letting us know how the incarnation will change and challenge the established order of things on earth and on what we can expect from our new king and Savior. The details that go into the story—the star and the arrival of the Magi, fear and questioning by Herod, Herod's request of the Wise Men, the adoration, and the return of the Wise Men to their lands, can help us to better understand more about what Matthew wants us to focus on as we hear the Gospel message he recorded. He wants it to be understood that this birth in Bethlehem was the Messiah and that his message was and is for all of us.

Why was the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem and not the great capital of Judea, Jerusalem is a detail worth pondering. The detail of where the Messiah was to be born was an important one for those that sought him and understood the Hebrew Scriptures. The birth place of Bethlehem

is the location mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures. Micah 5:2 states, “But you O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the elite clans of Judah, from you, shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel.” This sleepy town, six miles south of Jerusalem, a fertile land, known as the land of bread, was the fulfillment of prophesy. It was also called the City of David because it was the city of David’s origin. This place located Jesus with a kingly lineage, further linking him with prophesies and that the messiah would hail from the House of David. The Jewish people were anxiously looking for the coming of the Messiah, so the location of his birth place and his genealogical connection legitimized the claim of kingship. According to Daniel 9:25-27, the timing of this event could be actually be calculated. The deliverance through this temporal king would not only free the Jewish people from Roman bondage but lead them to greatness. For Matthew, communicating and connecting to Scripture the proper place and time made credible the claim that this was the Messiah.

What additional role did these Wise Men from the East serve beyond bringing gifts? Much of what we think we know about the birth story are in large part medieval interpretations— attaching names to the three (Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior), we even have made one of the king’s a Moor. The acknowledgment of the Magi to the birth of a king not only speaks to the fulfillment of prophesy, it communicates more. Whether they were Magi, magicians from the East, Arabia, Persia, astronomers or astrologers, king’s, philosophers or priests, what is important to this story is that they were not Jews but Gentiles, their sacred texts were not the Scriptures, that they followed a cosmic event, they came to Jerusalem to worship, to pay homage to the “King of the Jews.” But most of all they listened to God of our Savior.

Matthew tells us that the message of the Scriptures, the anticipation of a Messiah was heard not by the learned Jewish scholars in Herod’s court but rather by Gentiles from far off lands. Matthew gives other examples, similar to this one, where Gentiles recognize the Son of God over their Jewish neighbors, like the Centurion and his slave that was ill or even the demoniacs of Gadarene. It is unclear whether the Wise Men were the first converts but I think it is safe to say that they understood the magnitude of this event. The Gospel of Matthew is telling us from the very first chapters that the message of Christ was not just for the chosen people of Israel but for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The star, this cosmic event, is one of the most striking elements of this story here. For Matthew, this miraculous phenomenon was directed by God. There has been much speculation over the centuries over these spectacular movements in the heavens that led the Wise Men to Jesus in Bethlehem. Was it a comet, perhaps even Haley’s comet, or was it the conjuncture of Jupiter and Venus in 7 BC? It is hard to say what it exactly was. However, we do know that in ancient times many looked to the heavens for confirmation of great things, of fortuitous things. It had been recorded over the centuries of the appearance of comets, heavenly signs, celestial

events with the birth or death of distinguished men. These signs were favorable omens. A cosmic sign was additional proof that something special happened. With God anything is possible but as my brother would say we can lose the plot of the story when we over focus on such things. I think we all can agree that the star, as a metaphor in our faith, is a powerful one.

Now, we are introduced to Herod the Great in this Gospel. Herod was an appointment from the Roman emperor, Augustus. Herod distinguished himself in war, governed and defended his country effectively but ruthlessly. He came to power through military conquest of his “own” people. He rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem, returning to its great splendor, as well as making civic improvements to other cities and towns under his control. His leadership was marked by cruelty and violence. He secured his authority through taking out any perceived rival. Suspicious that his own family was plotting his overthrow; he murdered his favorite wife, her mother, two of her sons, and his eldest son. Emperor Augustus said of Herod, “that it was better to be Herod’s pig than his son.” This was a king to be feared, yet the mere mention of the birth of the “king of the Jews” by the Wise Men to him made him fearful! For Matthew, Herod was a stand-in, he represented all earthly kingships, all earthly authority. That the presence of God made man was running against all such structures.

Even the Wise Men show their resistance to the enthroned power of Herod for the divine one in Jesus. Matthew, using the words of the Magi challenges the authority of Herod, when they ask Herod, where is the child who has been born the king of the Jews?” This was a challenge to his authority. After the Wise Men pay homage they depart for home without honoring Herod’s request—a request for details that he hoped would lead him to the child. But through a dream where God spoke to them, the men from the East took an unannounced leave, knowing of Herod’s insincerity and wickedness.

It should also come as no surprise that the religious leadership of Jerusalem, the scribes and chief priests were fearful of this new king as well. He was a challenge to their authority. Herod represents, as do the scribes, the resistance “of this world to the divine kingship represented by Jesus (NIB 142).” It is not just Herod that is implicated in the rejection of Jesus’ messianic claim; for Matthew it was all who occupied the capital city of Jerusalem. Jesus’ earthly ministry, as we know, will come to an end in this city.

Herod’s panicked call upon his chief priests and scribes in v. 4 is an additional foreshadowing of what Christ’s earthly path will take, speaking to the challenges He will have with those knowledgeable with the Law like the scribes, chief priests mentioned but also alluding to the conflicts the Pharisees will have with Jesus. Both the Scribes and Pharisees are denounced by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, “for they did not practice what they taught (Mt 23:3).” Both religious and secular authorities work together to destroy this earthly and heavenly challenger.

These two parties worked together to finally destroy the human body of Christ yet were unable to destroy his message, a message both were blind to.

This story serves as templet for the reading and the seasons that follow Christmas and the blessing of the Epiphany of the Lord. The story of the Epiphany, as captured in the Gospel of Matthew, tells a memorable and lasting account of the birth of Christ as we shared in the Nativity pageant on Christmas Eve. Yet this story holds so much more for us beyond the gift of Light that is the birth of Christ. Matthew tells us that from the beginning of Christ's ministry, everyone is in; everyone is included—especially those visitors from the East. These visitors from the East showed us in their journey their perseverance, their yearning to know the truth. When they lost sight of the star, they stopped and sought guidance. They also listened to God and employed wisdom in honoring God over the earthly king. Like the Wise Men, we no longer need a star in the sky for guidance, for with the birth of Christ; the light is carried within us and seen in us. Those that carry the good news internally, no longer require a cosmic light from above. Let us go forth in this New Year and share the cosmic light of Christ, first viewed by the Wise Men with others.

Amen