

The Epiphany of Our Lord – January 6, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We get to celebrate Epiphany on Epiphany! That only happens once every six years or so. And because of the way leap years fall in the next decade, the next time Epiphany falls on a Sunday will be 11 years from now, in 2030. So let's make the most of it.

The story of the wise men is a story we don't always know what to do with. We tend to focus on the miracle of the star guiding the magi to the young Jesus, or on their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, signs that Jesus' birth is important for the whole world. And then we embellish the story. We say that they were kings and rode camels. There's nothing about that in Matthew, though it is in our Isaiah text that seems to foretell their coming. We say that there were three of them, though Matthew doesn't tell us that either. We've decided that based on the three gifts. And then we've given them names – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – and throw them into our manger scenes and Christmas cards together with the shepherds and the manger as though they were all part of the same story.

What I want to do this morning is to show what we miss when we limit the Epiphany story to a simple, heartwarming tale of three generous strangers to the baby Jesus. To do that, we need to remember that the visit of the magi is only a *part* of the story of Jesus' early life that Matthew is telling here.

The first thing I want us to see is that this is a political story. There is no way to take the first two chapters of Matthew seriously without realizing the political implications. Backing up into the first chapter of Matthew, we learn right away that Jesus is called the Messiah and tied by genealogy to King David. That means that right from the start we have the claim that Jesus is the rightful king of his people. Which means that the current king, Herod, is not. And that sets up the encounter of the magi with Herod in our reading this morning. The magi – I'm going to keep calling them the magi instead of "wise men", because that's what the text says, and because I don't think it was very wise of them to tell the sitting king about the birth of the new king. If he doesn't know already, then maybe he doesn't *need* to know! Anyway, the magi share their knowledge about the newborn king, and Herod is terrified. Our translation says, "frightened," but this is the same word translated elsewhere as "terrified." Herod is terrified because this is a serious threat to his claim on power. And all of Jerusalem is terrified with him because they know he has to do something about it, and that something won't be good. Then right on the spot, Herod cooks up a plan to have the magi help him find this new pretender to his throne.

This leads to the second thing I want us to see here. The magi, thanks to a heads up from the angel, resist. They don't play along. They won't go back to tell Herod where to find Jesus. And that makes them law-breakers. Because Herod, after all, is the law of this land. What he says goes. The magi are foreigners, guests in his land. And yet the dare to disobey. They dare to refuse to cooperate with him. And God helped them break the law. What do you think about that? The magi resist, with God's help, and there are terrible consequences to their resistance. Remember, he is terrified. And terrified people often lash out. If they will not help him find the right child, well then he'll just have to go and kill all of the children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old and under. It's not a pleasant part of the story, but it's there, just a little further on in this second chapter. I'm sure Herod, in his raging (to quote the famous carol) blamed those sneaky, deceitful magi for making him do this terrible thing. It was *their* fault. They wouldn't give him what he wanted, so he had to make these little children collateral

damage in order to keep his grip on power, which I'm sure he would rationalize, was the best thing for his people.

The third thing that I want us to see, which is also not in our text this morning but comes right after, is that as a result of the magi's appearance Herod's terror, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are forced to become refugees. They have to flee from their home in Bethlehem, flee from the territory of Judea, down into the neighboring country of Egypt, in fear for their lives. Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, God with us in the flesh, began his human life as a political refugee relying on the mercy and protection of a foreign country. We didn't invent refugees in the modern world. They are as old as humankind. And I think it's important to remember that Jesus was one of them.

Put into its larger context, we see that the story of the magi is much more like a story off the front page of the paper, or the lead story on the evening news, than it is a heart-warming children's story. What's the takeaway for us, then? The takeaway is this: Jesus' coming into the world as the real king, the one we claim as Lord and whose kingdom will have no end – that is a real threat to the powers that be, not just in ancient times, but right now, in our own time.

Jesus' claim to our allegiance is opposed by the powers that be, the forces of nationalism, greed, and lust for power that need our cooperation, our collaboration, and our silence in order to thrive. But just as the magi and the holy family had the Angel of the Lord to help in resisting these powers, so do we also have God's help. We have the gospel, the “good angel,”¹ which not only calls on us to resist the forces that defy God and draw us from God, but promises that throughout our resistance, whatever may come, God will be with us in Jesus Christ. Because it is Jesus who ultimately gives himself as collateral damage, and on the cross defeats the powers of sin, death, and evil on our behalf.

As the magi found out, and as Mary and Joseph found out, our faith is not simply a private or family affair. It has implications for our life in the world around us, implications that are often political, and sometimes a matter of life and death – if not for us, then certainly for others for whom God also cares. May God indeed be with us in this New Year as we discern our own times through the lens of the gospel, so that we may trust God's promise of life and act faithfully on behalf of others, especially those most vulnerable to becoming collateral damage. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ A little play on words. The Greek word for gospel is “euangelion,” “eu” meaning good, and “angelion,” meaning message, from which we get our word angel. (Angels are literally messengers.)