

Christmas 2B 2021 Sermon

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, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*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."*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

There is a lot going on in our world right now. In the United States, we just passed 20 million cases of COVID-19, December being the deadliest and most infectious month since the pandemic began. We have wonderful new vaccines, but there are problems in distributing and administering them. In politics this week, members of Congress will challenge the electoral college vote; and the senatorial races in Georgia seem to be on everyone's mind. We just celebrated New Year's, and college football bowl games are being played.

With all that is going on in our world, it is easy for us to forget that, *for the Church*, it is **still** the Christmas season – the 10th Day of Christmas, to be exact. The message of the angel to the shepherds still rings in our ears: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people. For unto you is born... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11, ESV)

The angel delivers the "good news of great joy" to the shepherds; but the angel *also* says that this "good news" is for **all** the people." It is for you and for me.

In today's Gospel, we find that "**all** the people" includes certain men from the East called "magi," who Biblical scholars tell us were likely Zoroastrian priests from Persia, modern day Iran. The good news of great joy had come to *them*, also; not from an angel but by reading the *stars*, the cosmos itself! And appropriately so; for, as many Christian writers down through the centuries have told us, Christ comes to save, to heal, to make whole, not just *humanity*, but the entire Creation.

Now, if this "good news of great joy" was discovered by the magi in a star, we must assume that that star was there for **all** the world to see! In fact, God is forever coming to us through Creation. St. Paul writes, "Ever since the creation of the world [God's] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." (Romans 1:20, NRSV) God's divine nature, which is self-giving Love, is found in the very fabric of Creation itself! Shepherds in Israel **heard** the good news from an angel; Zoroastrian priests in Iran *read* the good news in the stars; and undoubtedly other people of many religious – and no religious – traditions, throughout the earth and down through the centuries, have heard, seen, or felt that good news, also. For, as the angel said, the news is "for **all** the people;" and as St. Paul said, it is revealed in Creation itself.

And yet, seeing or hearing the good news is not enough. We must realize that the good news of great joy is *for us*, and take it into ourselves. "Unto **us** a child is born; unto **us** a son is given," the Prophet Isaiah wrote. (9:6) And the angel had said to the shepherds, "**To you** is born... a savior, who is Christ the Lord." Martin Luther famously said that, while we may believe that the consecrated bread and wine of the Eucharist is truly "the body of Christ, the bread of heaven" and "the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation," this means *nothing* if it is not the body and blood of Christ *for you* and *for me*; if we do not *receive* it into our souls and let it *fill* us and transform us.

In today's Gospel, the Magi and King Herod *both* receive the same news of the Messiah's birth; but they receive and respond to that news *very* differently.

The magi see the star while in Iran, and follow it almost 1000 miles to Jerusalem. There, they go to Israel's king, Herod, and ask him where the king of the Jews is to be born, for they want to go and pay him homage.

Now, the New Testament Greek word which is translated "to pay homage" was commonly used to describe the custom of prostrating oneself at the feet of a king. One scholar writes, "The physical posture [implied by "paying homage"] dramatically expresses the idea of giving... [one's] entire [self] to Christ."¹ **This** is what the magi have come to do: to pay homage; to give *themselves* to this newborn king. We sometimes think that the magi have come all that way to offer their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; but that isn't their principal purpose in searching for the newborn king. Matthew tells us, "When they saw that the star

had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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.” *After* they had offered **themselves**.

Now, when the magi come to **Herod**, asking where the child who will be king of the Jews has been born, because they have “seen his star at its rising,” Herod does *not* receive this as “good news of great joy.” Matthew tells us, “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod may *tell* the magi to “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;” but we know this is a lie. For, after the magi, warned in a dream, return to their own country *without* first returning to Herod, Herod is furious, and in fear and rage he orders that all children in and around Bethlehem who are 2 years of age or under be killed. (Matthew 2:16)

One scholar notes that “The source of the [**magi’s**] *joy* and the source of **Herod’s** *fury* [are] one and the same: the child born to be the king.”² What was received as “good news of great joy” by the shepherds and the magi was received by Herod as a dangerous threat to his power and position (not to mention his ego).

How people respond to the **birth** of Jesus foreshadows how people will later respond to his **adult** life and ministry. For some, Jesus, his teaching, and his ministry are received as “good news of great joy”; to others, like some of the Jewish religious leaders and Roman authorities, the adult Jesus is received as a dangerous threat to their power, position, and prestige. While the *child* Jesus escaped being killed by King Herod, the *adult* Jesus will be put to death.

For us, the **child** Jesus is adorable and harmless; while the adult Jesus is challenging, calling us to follow him, to become one with him and the Father.³

There are still a few more days of Christmas. Let us not leave this Season of the Incarnation without pondering how we respond – not only to the good news of the *birth* of Jesus, but to his whole life: his teaching, his healing, his spirit, his love, his death, his resurrection. For not only is it true that it is unto **us** that a child has been born; it is also unto us that this adult Messiah lived, taught, healed, died, and was raised. Unto us.

For it is not just the *magi* who seek the Messiah. You and I are here at this virtual worship service today because we, *too*, seek the Messiah: God in human form. And perhaps more importantly, as Linda and Mike Smith recently reminded me, the Messiah seeks us. The question for us is: Do we want to be found?

AMEN

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*. WordSearch edition.

² Miroslav Volf, “Joy is for Epiphany, too,” *The Christian Century*, December 27, 2017 <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/joy-epiphany-too>

³ John 17:20-25