

## Year B Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2021

✚ We have a great story in Matthew’s gospel today, full of mystery and intrigue, filled with powerful and wealthy men playing out a deadly game. This story has much to tell us on this Epiphany Sunday, but let’s hear it on its own terms as Matthew wrote it. That means forgetting about the angel speaking with Mary, about the census and the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It means forgetting about shepherds and angels singing on high. It means no stable and manger. None of this are part of Matthew’s story.

✚ Matthew begins his account of Jesus’ life with a genealogy that places Jesus in a direct line of descent via Joseph, beginning with Abraham

and including David. This establishes Jesus firmly in the Jewish family and importantly in the line of kings going back to David.

✚ Then the story begins by telling us about Mary (engaged to Joseph – but not yet living together) who “... *was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*”. Joseph isn’t buying the Holy Spirit excuse and plans to quietly dismiss her, but an angel visits him in a dream and tells him all about Jesus and that he should marry Mary. That is where we begin today.

✚ Jesus is born in Bethlehem sometime in the last year or two. Presumably this the home of Mary and Joseph. There’s no reason to think

otherwise. He wouldn't have been a newborn when today's events occur. "Wise men" – or properly magi - belonged to a particular elite class of priests in Persia and northern India. In their religion, Zoroastrianism, they played various roles including reading the stars – bearers of the light of truth. As Matthew tells it, they saw a new star at its rising, which is to say, in the East (somewhere over India). It would have taken them quite a while to analyze this phenomenon as it slowly rose from day to day and week to week. At some point, they would have drawn the conclusion that as it seemed to be headed westward it must be pointing towards the birth of a new king in that direction, so with the authority of their office and bearing gifts probably from their own king, they made the journey.

- ✚ This must have been a very strange star, for it seems to have led them precisely to Jerusalem the centre of Jewish power. So, as I said, a year or two after his birth, these magi arrive in Jerusalem and logically head to the palace of king Herod, where they expect to find a young prince had been born with great power – the power of the heavens as suggested by this star.
- ✚ Instead, what they encounter is Herod, a megalomaniac puppet king under Roman authority, who claims to have no knowledge of this amazing, heavenly ordained prince, who if genuine and of the Davidic line would prove a great threat to his own power and lineage. The chief priests are summoned and based on

scripture suggest that Bethlehem – the city of David - would be the birthplace of such a child.

✚ With that knowledge, Herod sends the magi off to Bethlehem to find this child and pay their homage and then report back to him, so that he can also go and pay his own homage (aka kill him). Well, this very odd star leads the magi right to the front door of Joseph and Mary's home and they do go in and offer gifts fit for a king, ensuring that their own king back in Persia has the basis for a good future ally in this small prince. Another dream sequence happens, telling the magi not to report back to Herod, so they go straight home.

✚ Just to wind up Matthew's tale, Joseph has a dream in which an angel tells him to flee to

Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod, who then does indeed send soldiers to Bethlehem to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem two years old or younger.

✚ Meanwhile Joseph, Mary and Jesus set up a new home in Egypt and live there until Joseph has another angelic dream in which he is told that Herod has died and he should take his family back to the land of Israel. They do exactly that but can't return to Bethlehem as the new king in that region, Archelaus, is no better than his father. So, they decide to move away from the centre of power up to Galilee, where they settle in a town called Nazareth. How old Jesus is at this point is hard to say from Matthew's story. Herod died in 4 BC, and as we tend to think of the year 0 as being Jesus'

birth year (which it can't be if Herod was on the throne at the time), that makes it a bit tricky in dating things. So, that is Matthew's introduction of Jesus to his readers. The story then continues years later with John the Baptist.

✚ Sticking with Matthew's account of things, what riches can we mine from this story this morning at Epiphany? First, remaining in the world in which this story was first told, we have two things happening in the scriptures that Matthew draws our attention to. We see them both in the short passage from Isaiah this morning.

✚ At a time of exile and hopelessness, Isaiah offers hope to his people. He points to the abiding presence of God, who pierces the thick

darkness with light. And indeed, Israel is restored and Jerusalem rebuilt. For Matthew, Jesus is that light. God has never abandoned Israel and is now come to be with us in Jesus to turn the darkness of oppression into light.

✚ The second thing going on here is that on numerous occasions Isaiah points to a time when all the world will come to worship the one true God, thus extending the kingdom of God from Israel to the whole world. This is what he is getting at as he talks about the wealth of nations coming on multitudes of camels from all over, bringing gold, frankincense and proclaiming and praising God.

✚ The star represents the light of a foreign religion and its people (in this case

Zoroastrians, for whom light and dark are the central motifs of the battle between good and evil) – this star coming from Persia and descending on Jesus is a way of saying: here is the light of the world, and the power and presence of God and even foreigners can see that and come and worship and pay homage with rich gifts.

✚ In his telling of the origin of Jesus, Matthew is offering us a great epiphany: a moment we can look at and see God being born into the world, and while Jesus is certainly Jewish and remains so, he is also the one true God come to live in our skin. That it is magi, Zoroastrian priests, who come is very intentional in Matthew's telling of the story. Persia and northern India, the home of this religion, were about as foreign

and far away as most people could imagine, and they like the Jews, are also monotheists who represent the oldest religion around both then and now. And if even these far off, exotic people with ancient, enlightened wisdom can see God in Jesus and come to pay him homage, then the whole story of Israel and scripture has come full circle to encompass everything and everyone. This is the epiphany of Matthew's gospel. In Jesus, God has come to save the whole world.

✚ And for us 2000 years later? We, the descendants of Jesus' disciples, who have carried this truth and who have made it our mission to share with the world can find great hope here. We, who claim to be the continuing presence and body of Christ in this world are

that light shining like a star, revealing God's presence through our lives, our acts of compassion, love and forgiveness, in our humility and our vulnerability (just like that of the baby Jesus) and in the power of God manifested in each one of us by the very Holy Spirit of God.

✚ As we slowly re-emerge over the next several months from a COVID gloom that has itself behaved much like a star with its light revealing ugly truths of economic, racial and social injustices on an international scale; as we the Church re-emerge, can we also shine like the star of Bethlehem so that those truths don't just recede into the shadows again and get forgotten? Can we the body of Christ, who is God with us, be the love of God in the world

and act boldly by standing up and taking political positions on things, by holding the hand of a dying person, by sharing our wealth with the poor and hungry, by risking our very lives for the sake of others? Can we continue to work against racism, to do something about the horrendous problems right here in the GTA of poverty and unaffordable housing? Can we lobby our governments to share the COVID vaccine with poorer countries whose people are just as valuable as our own? Can we do all of that and more? This is where the gospel story takes us. Is it any wonder that Herod was afraid? For him the epiphany was frightening, because it took away his power. For us the epiphany is hope and life, because it means that God is indeed with us and will always be with us.