

LELC Epiphany

On Epiphany we celebrate the arrival of the Three Kings or Three Wisemen. They are “from the East.” They are exotic. They get the coolest Christmas pageant costumes. (Unless you are three and want to be an angel.) From the very start these Magi (to use the Greek term) have sparked imaginations and folktales. In some traditions they even have names: Balthazar from Arabia, Melchior from Persian, and Gaspar from India. No shepherd from the Bethlehem hillsides ever got a name. Just saying.

Why did Matthew’s Gospel even bother to have Magi? None of the others do. That’s a great question. The biblical scholars tell us that the Gospel of Matthew was probably written after Mark, which means that it was also after the Romans came into Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. The thought is that this Gospel is written in response to what happened next. The Jewish people started looking around for a scapegoat. Someone to blame for what happened to their beloved Temple. The people who had been followers of Jesus looked like a likely target. What with all their flaunting of the rules and welcoming everybody no matter what. So the Jews kicked the Christians out. The Christians were no longer welcome in the synagogues.

Not to mention that there were beginning to be larger and larger number of Gentile Jesus followers. What were they supposed to do with that? The burning questions of the day were things like, “Was Jesus just for the Jews? And if so, why were the Jews tossing them out on their ear?” Or maybe, was Jesus, and Jesus’ message of God’s unconditional love for everybody? Might that include Gentiles, too?”

It was slowly dawning of the followers of Jesus that Jesus’ message of love and forgiveness, acceptance and welcome, inclusion and equality WAS for everyone. It was a message of a way of life that was meant to change the whole world. Not just their little corner of it.

This cosmic implication of Jesus’ birth shows up in Matthew as a star in the heavens - to show that this was Heaven’s doing. And the star is guiding people from the East, that “others” were being drawn to Christ – just like they had been – to recognize his significance, his authority in their lives. Taken together, it means that, Yes, God’s love made real in Jesus is not just for some chosen few. God’s love IS for everybody.

All that is lovely, really lovely. And Matthew could have stopped right there. (And most of the time when we tell this story we do.) But Matthew doesn't stop there. Matthew has two more pretty powerful scenes that involve the current, local despot, Herod. First there is the part about Joseph being warned in a dream to flee to Egypt. About how Joseph, Mary, and Jesus do flee and thus become refugees, seeking asylum in Egypt, Which has been the basis of no end of very pointed art and/or editorial cartoons these past months as asylum seekers are being detained and turned away at our own border.

And then, even less retold or remembered, is the part about how Herod, enraged by the Magi's stealth, kills all the babies and toddlers in and around Bethlehem. It's the part about how, so often, in the aftermath of the temper tantrums of the powerful, nothing is left to the powerless but to weep for their children. Why did Matthew have to tell that part of the story? Maybe, because it is the truth?

So let's go back a little bit and take a closer look. The Magi? *Magoi* is the Greek word. It's plural. We don't know necessarily how many there were. Or that they were men, for that matter. They were not kings. They were more like king's advisors. A cross between astrologer and priest. They probably spent their days figuring out when the moon or stars said it was the auspicious time to do this or that. Kind of like a walking, talking Farmer's Almanac.

I kind of love the Magi. I relate to them because they are seekers. They have some education, some skill, some status. But they still are looking, longing, like the rest of the world, for a new king. Not just a new king, but a new kind of king. Even since the days when the prophet Samuel warned people that a king would just take their sons for soldiers, their daughters for servants, their crops to feed the king's household, and their money to make himself look powerful kings had been doing exactly that. Power would corrupt and absolute power would corrupt absolutely.

Every nation on earth had come to know that was true. I suspect the Magi of Matthew's story longed for a good and righteous king as much as our psalmist for today did. Saying, essentially, "Please God, let there be a good king, one who cares for the poor, who treats people fairly, and let that king live forever, or for at least as long as the sun and the moon."

We know that feeling. The longing for leaders that are fair. That aren't in it for themselves, not just trying to increase their own wealth, or power or fame. We long for leaders that want to take care of the land, and the people, and the future for our

children. It was that kind of longing that made the Magi leave their homes, their positions of status, their security, to go in search of that kind of king. Bringing with them whatever they might have to offer him to help him be that kind of king.

I think the pivot in the story that Matthew tells is that one little line, there at the end, that is usually just stated as a little epilogue, the “oh by the way” of the story. It says in v. 12. ***“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”*** Now some preachers have spiritualized the heck out of this last little sentence fragment. Translating it as “they left another way.” That their hearts were changed. I don’t argue with that – but it still doesn’t explain Herod. You’ll remember that Herod had told the Magi to go and find the child and then bring him word so that he could also go and pay homage. Lie. Lie. Lie. Did anyone think for a minute that Herod was going to do anything other than destroy any new king that might pose a threat to his power?

No, I think that there is more here than that. I think that in the Magi, in their decision to heed the angel message and not go back to Herod, we are seeing the first instance in the New Testament of civil disobedience. The Magi represent the first, and pretty important, instance of non-cooperation with the domination system, the corrupt and abusive powers-that-be.

Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus fled. But they were fleeing for their lives. They were choosing survival. Which really is not a choice. Outside of all-out war, it’s usually only the folks on the bottom rungs of society who find themselves having to make that kind of choice. But the Magi... The Magi had options. And the Magi chose to subvert Herod’s plans to preserve his power. The Magi risked their own safety. Herod could have come after them. By not returning to Herod, the Magi chose to serve Jesus, boldly.

One wonders what they must have seen. Or what they must have thought at what they saw. They went first to Jerusalem, but ended up in lowly Bethlehem. They had headed for the halls of power, but found themselves kneeling in the humblest of abodes. It must have made clear to them that Jesus and Herod were exact opposites. Herod was brutal and self-serving. Jesus was gentle, and self-giving. Herod was willing to slaughter children, to see others die so he would live and have power. Jesus was willing to give his own life so OTHERS might live. The power Herod had was only the power to hurt and to destroy. But the power that we have because of Christ Jesus and through the Holy Spirit is the power to love, the power to forgive, the power to give of ourselves for the sake of the world God loves.

Soooo? Why does Matthew include Herod? Matthew is setting the stage. It's about the life and death stakes of this story. The Cosmic consequences for us and all of creation. The Star, the light of Christ, pointed the Magi toward Jesus. And their journey points us to Jesus too.

Maybe the word for today is that we are called to be a Magi, a seeker. To lean into our own longing for a righteous king, and for the world of peace such leadership would bring. Maybe, through the story of the Magi, we are called to open our hearts and minds, to angel messages – dreams and otherwise – of how we might live out non-cooperation with systems that harm or destroy the little ones among us.

I won't presume to know how this story speaks to you today. I only pray that, like the Magi, the Light of Christ might lead us into boldness. Into daring adventure for the sake of generosity and support of God's mission to love the world. Maybe into adventures of servanthood, or advocacy, or non-violent resistance. May the Light of Christ shine on us, and through us. And may we be blessed with joyful homecomings, in this life and the next. Amen.