

Matthew 2:1-12

The Celebration of Epiphany

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Scholars haven't really landed on the source of today's story in Matthew. One possibility is that the outline of the story is taken from the story of Balaam in the book of Numbers. Balaam was a seer from the east who saw David's star rise, he resisted the efforts of an evil king to destroy his enemy, and instead blessed the enemy, thwarting the evil king. Certainly, it isn't hard to see some similarities to the story Matthew has constructed. Whatever the source, the story of the magi fulfills a very specific purpose in Matthew's narrative: To proclaim that Jesus is the king of the Jews, the Christ, and the promised ruler of Israel. That is what the author of Matthew wanted his community in the late first century to know and believe. So, what might this story say to us? One thing we will note is that, from the very beginning, Jesus' birth was good news for some and bad news for others. This is Matthew 2:1-12:

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ '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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,; they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

To his followers, he seemed to be at the top of his game. His life was the kind of life most people can only dream of living. He had it all...people at his beckon call, wealth, power. He was the picture of success. But it seemed no matter what he had or who he had, he only wanted more. And that constant wanting of more...more wealth, more power, more loyalty, left him vulnerable...in his leadership, relationships, life, in general. Imagine what it was like to serve in his administration. Those close to him knew he was prone to insecurity. They also feared what would happen if his anxiety went unrestrained.

King Herod liked being king. He liked it so much that he would do anything to make sure he stayed the king. So, when the wise ones from the East showed up, asking about a child who had been born the king of the Jews, talking about seeing a star rising, he was interested. Some translations use the word “magi,” instead of “wise men” to describe the strangers from the East. The word “magi,” from which the English word “magic” is derived, refers not so much to magicians, but to astrologers who studied the heavens for indications of significant events. King Herod was more than interested in this significant event because as far as he was concerned, *he* was the king of the Jews, not some child in Bethlehem. The insecure king was afraid. And tragically, when powerful people are afraid, people get hurt, sometimes they get killed. Read the rest of Matthew 2 if you need an example. Or watch the news.

These strangers that showed up in Jerusalem knew things. They hadn't just shown up there by accident, on a whim. The stars didn't lie. The wise ones may not have been certain about what they were seeking, but they were certain there was something to be found. Herod called the chief priests and scribes together. I mean...if the Messiah had been born, they would know where he was supposed to be. “Bethlehem,” they said. The King called a secret meeting with the strangers and he pumped them for information about when the star first appeared, and then he sent them to Bethlehem, instructing them to come back and tell him where they found the child. The wise ones, while not wise enough to stay away from Herod in the first place, were wise enough to know not to return to the King in Jerusalem after they found Jesus.

The fact that the King wanted the strangers to return to tell him where Jesus was leads me to believe the religious leaders were not planning to go check it out for themselves. I wonder why. The birth of the Messiah was good news, right? They knew the Hebrew scriptures. They had studied them their whole lives. Weren't they excited about the possibility that the Messiah had come? Maybe they didn't believe these visitors from afar. They said they saw a star, but what if that star wasn't a special occurrence, like a supernova explosion, comet, or alignment of planets? What if Matthew's point is that it was an ordinary star seen through the extraordinary eyes of strangers? Maybe those outsiders had "eyes to see" what Herod and the religious leaders did not.

The job of the chief priests and scribes, or at least one of their jobs, was to teach the people to see and read the signs of God, to watch for God's activity in the world. This could've been their moment. If the Messiah had been born, he would change everything for God's people. Such good news!! But wait...things weren't so bad the way they were. The chief priests and scribes were comfortable. They had a king, and he was even Jewish. He was very much under the thumb of the Roman Empire, but still...it could be worse. They weren't really feeling oppression exactly. Maybe they didn't need a Messiah coming in and messing everything up, not now. Turning things upside-down didn't sound like a great plan to any of them. They had a lot to lose. No, this was not good news.

This is actually a pretty common thing. People who have been traumatized by oppression aren't always excited about rocking the boat, even if there is a chance things could get better, because they fear things could also get worse. Here's an example:

More than sixty years ago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. helped organize the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. The protest was in response to the injustice of the southern Jim Crow laws. For a year, people of conscience coordinated efforts to bring attention to a public wrong. With the Supreme Court ruling, based on the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection under the law, the Montgomery city bus lines reluctantly changed their policy so that all people could ride on the bus in whichever seat they chose. For some people this was really good news. For some people it was not. And it may surprise you that some of the people for whom this was not good news were Black.

Over time, the story of the civil rights movement has been simplified and smoothed out, making it seem like all Black people just fell in line behind Dr. King. There were many, though, who did not support Dr. King or the movement because they were afraid. They thought going against the white power structure was foolish, even if the law was on their side. They imagined it would only make their lives, that had come to be a little less oppressive and scary, worse. Their fear made it difficult to imagine the possibility of a better life for all people, including themselves. Many people in the Black middle class preferred to hold on to the imperfect-but-better-than- some-other-people life they lived. That doesn't make them bad people. In most cases, it makes them scared people. You see, the fight for justice always comes more easily for the ones who have nothing to lose. In our story today, the chief priests and scribes, even Herod, had a lot to lose if Jesus really was the Messiah: their wealth, their status, their privilege, their ability to keep others in their place. Those strangers from the East...they had nothing to lose.

It was as if Herod and the religious leaders listened to the magi, saw the star, and said, "Oh crap...that can't be good for us." The magi, on the other hand, studied ancient texts, saw the star, and said, "Cool, let's go."

We need to be the "Cool, let's go," kind of people. The world needs us to be. And here is why: The old ways are not working. If nothing else, the stories of our faith show us that when what we are doing doesn't work, God does something new. And when we recognize it, even when it's scary, even when it will cost us, we need to take our cue from the magi and respond, "Cool, let's go." In other words, I am asking you, in the midst of a very dark time, to keep looking for the star-Light and follow it...AND, if you can, grab your neighbors' hands and take them with you.

Listen, I do not live under a rock, so I know that we are only at the very beginning of 2021 and many of us already want to cancel our subscription to it. And really, who can blame us? COVID hasn't slowed down a bit, some of us are physically ill, we feel lonely and isolated, and there was a terrorist attempt to seize control of the Capitol building in Washington D.C. this week. Honestly, there is nothing about any of that that makes me want to say, "Cool let's go," *except*, we can GO the other direction. We can follow the light God has for each one of us into a future that is good news for everyone.

We cannot allow ourselves to be like Herod, like the chief priests and scribes, holding the truth about God in our hands, unable to see it, or worse, refusing to share it. We cannot cling to what we have, afraid that what is good news for the ones who really need some good news, will be bad news for us. We cannot settle for some of us being okay while others are left behind. Because the truth is, deep down in the truest parts of ourselves, we know that if our neighbors are not whole, we cannot be whole.

There are a lot of people in our nation who are afraid. Their fear of losing, losing wealth, status, and power or their fear of losing what little they have, is so strong that what we understand as good news for everybody feels like bad news to them. We are called to continue to be bearers of the good news of God's love, justice, and hope. I wish I could tell you that if we just sprinkle kindness and love around like confetti, everything will change. It won't. There is hard work ahead because there are hard days coming. These days of national turmoil leading to the inauguration, coupled with the increase in the number of people infected with COVID-19, will be dark.

Today's story is a good example of how things often get worse before they get better. In the story, the strangers from the East didn't return to King Herod, so Herod, doing everything he could to cling to power, had all the male children 2 years old and younger killed. Now, there isn't any record that actually happened, even though Herod was known to be a pretty horrible king. But let's see that part of the story for what it is...a reminder that evil, no matter how evil, cannot completely extinguish the light. The light always shows up somewhere else. In this case, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to Egypt and stayed there until Herod died, and then, "...a messenger of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt..." and they returned to Israel.

Part of the hard work ahead for us is right here...in our hearts and minds. If we want others to see the Light, we have to show it to them. We have to practice looking for and following the light in our own lives. Our practice of giving out Star Words each Epiphany is one way we practice looking for that light. Star Words give us a reason to pause and reflect, to consider what God is up to. Each one of us is given our own Star Word which we are asked to use as a point of reflection for the year. When I receive my Star Word each year, I take a moment and write down my initial impression of the word. And then, I keep the word on our

refrigerator at home, so I remember to reflect on it periodically. I invite you, today, before time gets away from you, to write down your first thoughts about your Star Word. Throughout the year, I will remind you to write a few sentences about how the Word is showing up in your life...or not and to think about what you could learn. This week, I will be sharing my reflections on my 2020 Star Word, JOY. Watch for that in your email inboxes and on Facebook.

I have a 2021 Star Word for all of you. There are two ways to get one. You can let me know in the comments if you would like a word and I will message it to you through FB messenger and mail the actual star to you. OR...if you would like to draw your own word, I will be outside under the portico at the church from 11:45-12:15. Drive through with your mask on and let your Star Word pick you!

Will you pray with me:

Holy One,

We acknowledge that we are not always ready to receive your best gifts for us. You offer each one of us a word to take with us on our journey, hoping it will bring us closer to you and to the truest version of ourselves, hoping it will inspire us to say to you, "Cool, let's go."

It is often our habit to turn aside, stumble over, or even reject experiences and encounters that we later understand to have been precious gifts. Help us to be open to the gift you offer us now through our Star Words. We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for us today, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into your love and your mystery. Amen.