

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-23

January 6, 2019

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\*Title slide

For many protestant churches, today is the celebration of Epiphany. Epiphany is the season in the church year between Christmas and Lent. These liturgical seasons are a way for the church to keep time because Ecclesiastes as reminds us, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven..." Epiphany, specifically, helps us remember, in all times and places, God reveals Godself to human beings. And of course, this is true today in this time and place. Today's text, the story of the three wise men, shows us that the revelation of God extends not only to the "in" crowd, but even to the ones who have been considered outsiders.

The wise men were, indeed, that...outsiders. They were Persian or Babylonian experts in the mystical arts, such as astrology and the interpretation of dreams. If you were around this fall, you will remember we spent a good deal of time in the Hebrew Bible talking about the trouble the Israelites had with the Persian and Babylonian Empires. These wise men were truly "the other" from the perspective of the Jewish people. One thing to note as we look at this story-while the wise men in the Gospel of Matthew's story are included in many of our nativity scenes, they have nothing to do with the birth story from the Gospel of Luke, that includes shepherds and angels singing. These two stories should not be conflated. They were written for different audiences, by very different authors.

\*There are times I think of the Three Stooges when I think about the wise men. I wrote a skit a few years ago called "The Three Wise Guys," in which the wise men spend much of their journey arguing about what

their theme song ought to be and who was carrying the heaviest gift. I am certain my portrayal of them is not what the author of Matthew had in mind. I'm sure you've probably heard before, we don't even know that there were three of them. The author says there are three gifts, not three people. Anyway, they follow a star for a very long time, two years or so, and lose sight of it at a pretty important time, in Jerusalem, the holy city. And, of all the people to ask for directions, they choose Herod. What we know about Herod is that even documents beyond the biblical texts indicate he was a cruel, unscrupulous man who was the "puppet" king of Judea from 37-4 BCE. He was completely under the thumb of the Empire and was absolutely the worst person to ask the question, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" After all, as far as he was concerned, *he* was the king of the Jews. After gleaning information about when the wise men first saw the star appear, essentially trying to use them as stooges, Herod sent them on their way with instructions to be sure and let him know where they found him. I'm sure...laughing as they left...Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha.

\*Many nativity scenes, much like the silhouettes on the bulletin cover, imagine the wise men visiting Jesus in a manger, even the book I read to the children this morning has their visit very shortly after Jesus' birth. But this story says something very different. The wise men would have taken quite a long time to get from their places of origin. Jesus must have been between one and two years old and at home, not still hanging out in the stable. The gifts were certainly not what we would take to a busy toddler-gold, frankincense and myrrh. Very strange gifts for a young boy, yet I should note, this story of the beginning of Jesus' life forecasts the whole of Matthew's gospel. For Matthew, this child is royalty, so gold is a very appropriate gift. Frankincense was both costly (fit for a king) and, along with myrrh, was used to prepare bodies for burial. This story, written after Jesus' death, points us already to the end of Matthew's story...Jesus' death.

After the visit by the wise men, who were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, Joseph had an encounter with an angel who warned him that Jesus was not safe in Bethlehem. He fled with Mary and Jesus, while Herod issued "instructions to kill all the children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding region." The story ends tragically in verse 18 with Matthew loosely quoting Jeremiah 31:15, claiming the prophecy was fulfilled,

"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

This is a very different story than our nativity scenes tell. My seminary New Testament professor, Bernard Brandon Scott, wrote a series for the Jesus Seminar called, *Christmas Stories*. In the one on the Gospel of Matthew, he writes, "This story does not celebrate innocence, or a quiet Christmas night in Bethlehem, but a tragic situation with the father, mother and child in flight for their lives and Rachel weeping for her children because they were no more. A grieving mother is the image of Christmas. This powerful image of a family fleeing across borders and mothers weeping for their dead children has a formidable contemporary semblance. We see it every day on the front pages of our newspapers and news sources. It is front and center in our politics...It is time for those with eyes to see!"

Our ability to *see* literally means life or death for our brothers and sisters who are immigrants and refugees. So, I am going to be really direct. There is absolutely no doubt in my mind that, with unparalleled clarity, scripture instructs Christians to welcome and care for refugees and immigrants. We can debate how to do that, where the resources to do so should come from, what the United States' role has been in creating the challenges we are facing now, and what the best way to

talk about this with people who disagree with what the Bible actually says, but as far as I'm concerned, from a biblical perspective, Christians are called to extend hospitality to the ones who are at the border, asking for our help. We should be insisting that our immigration policies are life-giving and not death dealing. People should not be forced to enter the country in ways that are dangerous, even deadly.

Let's understand that the stories of immigrants and refugees do not begin with entering the United States. Their stories begin in their countries of origin, yet our nation's immigration policies focus only on entering the country-increasing border security, imposing harsh penalties on the ones who are arrested and discouraging people from seeking asylum by taking children from their parents. As Americans, we have this sort of romantic notion that imagines all the world wanting to come here to live "the American dream." However, one Honduran congressman, responding to questions about why Hondurans are fleeing the country, gives us a window into what's really going on. He said, "They are not seeking the American dream. They are fleeing the Honduran nightmare." Or, the El Salvadoran nightmare. Or, any number of other nightmares happening in our world. I want to be clear, I am not suggesting that ours is not truly a great country. I am saying that, overwhelmingly, people would rather stay in their homes than risk their lives, and the lives of their children, to come here. That is a fact. I guess I am also acknowledging that I have done nothing to earn my place here. I was born here because I was lucky. I don't think that stroke of luck gives me the right to deny others the right to freedom, safety, and, yes, the American dream, if it still exists.

And even beyond countries of origin, the stories of immigrants and refugees, like our own stories, begin with God. "God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God they were created," Genesis 1:27. Inside every single one of us is the same divine spark. Yet, we have too often used language that denies the truth that each

human being, regardless of origin, legal status, ethnicity, religion, or any other qualifier, has intrinsic worth and is deeply loved by God. No human being is *illegal*.

\*There are other scripture passages that should inform our position on immigrants and refugees. Exodus 23:9, “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” And I might add, according to the Gospel of Matthew, so was Jesus.

\*Leviticus 19:33-34, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. <sup>34</sup>The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”

These reminders from the Hebrew Bible, of God’s people captive in Egypt, are connected to our text today, not just because Egypt is part of the stories. The story of Jesus is rooted in the story of the captive Israel, in this case, especially with regard to the life of Moses. Moses and Matthew’s Jesus were both born at a time in which God’s people were oppressed by hostile forces-Moses by Pharaoh in Egypt and Jesus by Herod and the Roman Empire. As babies, both were potential victims of the oppressors, both of their stories include miraculous displays of God’s power, and a moment of passing through the waters-Moses at the Red Sea and Jesus in the waters of baptism. They were both tested in the wilderness and each gave their authoritative teaching from a mountain-Moses, the giving of the law from Mt. Sinai and Matthew’s Jesus, the Sermon in the Mount. We will see in the next few weeks, as we look at the Gospel of Matthew through Easter, that these parallels to Moses are an important element in Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus throughout the narrative.

Of course, a key difference in the narratives of Moses and Matthew’s Jesus is that, in Moses’ story, Egypt is a place of danger and oppression,

from which the Israelites flee for the promised land. For Jesus, and his family, there is safety in Egypt when the promised land becomes a place of danger and oppression. The Bible has story after story of God's people moving around and story after story of the importance of extending hospitality to strangers. The stories of persons displaced from home go hand in hand with stories of God's people extending hospitality to widows, orphans, and strangers. We cannot both claim scripture informs the way we live and refuse to extend hospitality and compassion to immigrants and refugees. We cannot claim to follow the ways of Jesus, a brown-skinned refugee, while failing to welcome our brothers and sisters from Syria, Central America, Mexico and other countries plagued with poverty, war, and violence, most of whom have experienced things we cannot even imagine.

\*In the words of Disciples of Christ minister Rev. Dr. William Barber, "We need a moral movement that brings people together to promote the general welfare and brings peace on earth, good will to all."

Rev. Barber's comment reminds me that each year, at some point in the Christmas season, I hear the phrase "War on Christmas." Several years ago, Christians got whipped up over the design of Starbucks cups with an insufficient nod to the "real meaning of Christmas." Every year it seems there is an argument about whether or not a nativity scene ought to be allowed on public property or whether school children should be allowed to sing "Silent Night." Yet, the Christmas stories in scripture seem remarkably unconcerned with these things. Instead, we read about God revealing Godself through Jesus' birth, a vulnerable baby, born in the midst of Roman oppression of Israel. We read of the revelation of God to outsiders in the story of the wise men and the political persecution of Jesus and his family and Joseph's heart-wrenching decision to flee with his family to a country far from home. In the Gospel of Luke, through the shepherds, we see the ones who were poor, living in the shadows, were the first to know of Jesus' birth. It seems to me, the real war on Christmas happens every time we make

someone (or a group of someones) “the other”, every time we turn our backs on the ones who are vulnerable.

We cannot view Christmas as if it’s only about one point in time, 2000 years ago. If we do, it becomes a relic, a cute story to trot out once a year, sitting by the fire in our pajamas. But Christmas is more than that...it requires something of us. It requires something different than raising our voices in loud defense of creches on the courthouse lawn and protesting snowflakes on our coffee cups. It requires us to be the very loud voices of support for families who are afraid and far from home. It requires us to risk being unpopular with our neighbors who feel very comfortable chanting “build that wall.” It requires us to refuse to accept any version of Christianity that is not filtered through the lens of love and compassion for our neighbors. And it requires us to make a choice. What kind of life we want? Do we want to live a life traveling together, with light baggage, offering our best treasures, thirsty for following the star and changing routes...or will we choose the life of the palace, plagued with scams and intrigues, subject to the power of others, scratching at darkness, isolated and full of fear? The first choice is life-giving, the second sows death everywhere. (adapted from a prayer by Rev. Angel L. Rivera Agosto)

We have to choose.

I will end this morning with a poem I have shared before, but I think it’s appropriate for this day as we think about the kind of life we want to have.

It’s called *Shelter*:

If I have anything to do with it, my life will be a shelter for every weary wanderer. It will feel like a well-worn sweater, smell like fresh baked bread and it will sound like the one thing we become wayfarers only to hear.

Here you are wanted. Welcome home.

Amen.

