

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Epiphany  
Do You Follow the Star or Not?  
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 60:1-9  
Psalm 72:1-2; 10-17  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

For those of you who heard me preach on Christmas Eve, you know I opened by talking about a story. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I'm going to do that again, only this time, it's not a single, specific story, but rather a continually growing family of stories. There are a lot of elements to a good story. When I was young, one of my favorites was that of King Arthur. (OK, it is actually still one of my favorite stories.) Great stories have a struggle between good and evil, and teach universal truths through that struggle. They have great characters, such as King Arthur, Merlin, Guinevere, Sir Lancelot, and the treacherous Mordred. In fact, it is because of these great characters that each generation revisits this legend to retell it in their own way. And it isn't just a struggle between good and evil, but it's a struggle where the stakes are high: Terrible things will happen if good loses. The fate of England rested on Arthur defeating Mordred and finding the Holy Grail. Speaking of the Holy Grail, there is an element of magic, or some

other great power in really good stories. Think of the powerful wizard Merlin. Lastly, many great stories never really end. Some versions of the Arthur legend end with the gravely wounded king being carried off to the isle of Avalon for healing after defeating Mordred in battle. Does he survive? And then there is Merlin, who is trapped in a magical suspended state, ready to return when England needs him most.

The story from today's reading in Matthew chapter two shares many of these elements of a great story: Good verses evil where the stakes are high, tremendous power, and a story that never really ends. What I want to focus on today, however, are the characters. They draw us in. In fact, I would say that as we read this story of the wise men visiting baby Jesus, we enter into the story as one of the three main character types. We are either King Herod, his priests and scribes, or the magi. Who we are in life is up to us, but enter into this story we must.

King Herod is a sad character all around. He was half Edomite, half Nabatean, which would have made his rule over the nation of Israel hard enough, but on top of that, he was put in charge by the Romans, who were almost universally hated

by the Jews. Herod is the obvious "bad guy" in this story. Even though today's reading ends with the magi leaving, we know what happens next: King Herod realizes he was tricked, and ruthlessly slaughters all the baby boys in and around Bethlehem, in a failed attempt to kill Jesus. It would be difficult to come up with a more nasty villain than Herod. It is well-known that he was paranoid about losing his throne later in life, and then he hears what was probably the most disturbing news he could possibly have received: a king had been born in Israel, and it wasn't his son! The fact that Herod turned to the priests and scribes indicates that He may have suspected who this young king might really be. King Herod then crafts a sneaky plan: Use the innocent magi as his spies. He lies to them and sends them on their way.

Who represents King Herod today: Someone who grew up in the Church, or at least knows the gospel story, but then fell away from the faith and is now openly hostile to God. Herod should have known better. Having an Edomite father, he likely followed Jewish customs, so he should have known the Messiah would come, and that his own role as king was really more of a stewardship to look after the nation for a time. And when I say hostile to God, Herod takes the cake. How many have actually tried to kill the son of God? In essence, King Herod declared

war on God. He did so, not due to lack of faith; after all, if the prophecies about the Messiah weren't true, then this young king would be no threat to him. No, Herod took action because He feared the prophecies might be true. He tried to kill the Anointed One, and thereby, thwart God's plans in order to maintain power a little longer. King Herod is the conniving villain of the story, and he is undoubtedly on the losing side.

I don't expect there are any Herods in our congregation today, though there may be some former Herods. I'm certain many of us know a Herod. A Herod is scared, though on the exterior they may seem confident, angry, or simply apathetic. The most likely reason a Herod is fearful is because they are afraid of what submission to God might mean for their lives. They recognize that much of their life will have to change, and that is a scary prospect for anyone. So what can we do for the Herods in our life? We should definitely pray. Be persistent in prayer. Pray that you will never lose your burden for their souls. We also need to be patient. Fear is powerful. Be a safe person for them. Allow them to be honest without judging them. As much as we may want to nudge them along, we shouldn't push, or that could make them pull away. They have their own journey to walk with God, and

as long as they know where you stand, they will come to you when they are ready.

Let's move on to the priests and scribes. These characters in the story play a much smaller role than King Herod. He turns to them to learn where the boy king might be. Maybe he turned elsewhere first; we don't know. But he did ask them. Maybe Herod was just desperate, or maybe he knew enough of Jewish prophecy to have an inkling. We don't know what Herod knew or believed when he asked the scribes and priests, but they knew the correct answer. The fact that that is the end of their concern is very telling. Apparently, the scribes and priests didn't put much stock in the prophecies, or Herod would have had to arrest them to keep them from going to Bethlehem themselves. Wouldn't you go and search for yourself? Wouldn't you drop everything and head out that day? What could possibly be more important on your schedule than meeting the Savior of mankind?

Like King Herod, the scribes and priests are sad characters. Even more so than Herod, they should have known better. They devoted their lives to learning and interpreting Hebrew scripture, and yet when the time came, they failed the test.

The scribes and priests of today are the religious scholars, and in some cases, even pastors and priests, who know all about God, yet fail to worship Him in their hearts. They know all the right answers, yet lack any loyalty or personal commitment. God is merely an abstract to today's scribes and priests. Some of them may even think they are Christians, but their hearts aren't in it. Of course, one doesn't have to have a PhD to be a modern scribe or priest. One simply has to allow God into one's head, but keep one's heart off-limits. I don't think I have to tell you that such a "deal" doesn't work. God demands *all* of us—we don't set the terms.

If you or someone you know today is a scribe or priest character, then you know this story, but you know it as you know an article in a newspaper, not a personal note written for you by someone you dearly love. Like a Herod, a scribe is holding back, and what he or she displays on the exterior doesn't match what is going on in the heart. There may be fear here too. Likely to be an intellectual sort, a scribe or priest may fear losing respectability. They may fear being overcome by the subject of their studies. Or they may simply fear admitting that faith is greater than knowledge. Whatever the cause of their brain-heart bifurcation, the scribes and priests of today need our prayer just as much as the King Herods. Their

journeys may be far different, especially since many of them work in Christian institutions, and have given every appearance of being devoted believers. John Wesley may well have started out as one of these characters. We must not be shocked when a scribe reveals his or her true self. Instead, we need to encourage them in their new direction, and offer support; especially as they are likely to lose support among some of their peers whom they most respect. Accustomed to being scoffers, scribes and priests may seem arrogant, and it is a huge hurdle for them to join those whom they formerly dismissed. Scribes and priests need lots of love and support as they change their world view, learning for the first time that it isn't *seeing is believing*, but rather *believing is seeing*.

The final characters in today's story are the ones we all hope to be: the magi. These are the "good guys" who endured hardship, gave generously, and worshipped unabashedly. These characters are shrouded in mystery. We don't know if they were more wise men or kings. We don't know if they came from Persia or elsewhere. The big question is *why did they care about a king being born in a foreign land?* You would think they would be more interested in their own king's heir. Who were the Jews to them?

Unfortunately, the text doesn't help us much. Three times the Greek word for *worship* (*proskuneo*) is used (including by Herod), but that same word also means to *honor*. If Jesus was merely a king, they wouldn't worship him, they would honor him; but if they did in fact worship him, how did they know to do so? They didn't seem to know the king was not of Herod's line, or they likely would not have shown up at the palace in inquire—especially if they knew anything of King Herod's paranoia. And if the King of the Jews was merely a king like any other, why bother with the long trip?

And as an aside, I need to mention that just in case anyone thinks this story was made up, possibly to fulfill prophecy, early Christians would never have made pagan astrologers into such upright characters in the story, especially considering astrology was in conflict with everything biblical. Scripture could not in any way be seen to endorse astrology. I guess God has a sense of irony.

The visit of the magi—we assume there were three because there were three gifts—is also theologically significant. Notice who came to worship the baby Jesus. First there were the shepherds, who were the lowliest and the poorest of society. Next there were the foreigners who seemed to have no knowledge, yet

innocently worshipped. Both groups would be unexpected at the birth of royalty, let alone the Christ. Yes, God does have a sense of irony. Yet this is part of His message: Our preferences are all wrong! It's not the wealthy or the well-connected that are to be honored, but the poor and the unknown. In other words, it's those on the margins of society. God is making outsiders into insiders.

But there is more to it than that. Because the magi are Gentiles, I believe this is our first clue that God is preparing to remove the mantle of *God's chosen people* from the Hebrews and place it upon His Church, which will be led by Christ, and guided by the Spirit. The beauty of this change is that it doesn't exclude the nation of Israel at all. They are the first to hear the good news. They are the first to be invited in. But they can no longer cling to their lineage as their get out of jail free card. The Lion of Judah is on the move, and He is doing something far greater than anyone expected.

The magi characters of today are Christ's faithful Church. We may not have all the answers, but we don't have to. Most of us lack political power. Most of us lack wealth. Most of us lack prestigious degrees from big-name universities. That's ok. We make up for it when we worship. We worship whole heartedly.

We don't care if we are respectable in the eyes of the world. We don't care if it costs us financially; we give anyway. And the magi are the ones—the only ones—who witness miracles where no one else is looking. And just as I'm sure the magi told this story to anyone who would listen when they returned home, so we too share the story.

Of course, I'm speaking of what we are in our best moments. We often fall short. We may feel the pull towards the power of a King Herod or the prestige of a priest or scribe. We may want to hold on to some of our gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We may not even want to get on that camel to start the journey. But Christ is there in these moments too, calling us to Him. And for those who are magi, because we have heard Christ's initial call to worship Him on bended knee, we are likely to hear His call again when we wander from the path of the star.

Hopefully these three character types help you enter into this story. And if you don't like where you find yourself in this story, you have the freedom to change. Christ offered Himself for all time on the cross for that purpose, and He continually offers Himself in the elements of the Eucharist so that we might be strengthened for the long journey. The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh

were kingly gifts indeed, yet not even the magi were able to out-give Christ, who gave His very self for us. And the Eucharist is a celebration of that fact. Just as the Eucharist removes any possibility of sitting on the fence, so too does this story, where we must choose: do we follow the star or not?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.