

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 4, 2015  
Epiphany Sunday  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

On this day when we celebrate the Epiphany, it occurs to me that we could tell the story of the three kings and their journey in two ways. One version is shaped for the ears, hearts, and minds of *children*. The other version is better suited to *adults*.

The children's version is probably more familiar to us. It's the version we grew up with. It tells the story of three kings who come from afar, bearing gifts for the newborn King. There is wonder and magic about this story of these Magi who are led to Jesus from the distant East by a star. It has spawned wonderful carols like "We Three Kings" and others. The wise men's gifts to Jesus are the source of all of our gift-giving at this season, and they remind us that each of us has something we can give to the King.

This version of the story is one that we all need to hear, children and adults alike. But Matthew's account is also important, even though it might come with the warning that "this message may not be suitable for younger hearers."

Matthew shows us an element of the story that often gets overlooked in our contemplation of the Magi. He shows us the note of *fear and opposition* that

Jesus' birth sets in motion right from the start. Herod does not greet the news of Jesus' birth with joy, nor does he search for a gift suitable to give to the Messiah. Rather, he is disturbed and afraid. And not just Herod, but "all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3).

Matthew's more adult version of the story moves quickly from the glad moment of the adoration of the Magi to a darker, more sinister world of political intrigue, deception, and fear-induced violence. (This is perhaps why we read Luke's version of the nativity story on Christmas Eve, not Matthew's.)

And why is Herod so afraid? Perhaps one reason is because the one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to *remain in power*. Gone from Herod's consciousness is the notion of servant leadership required by Israel's prophets. Gone is any notion that he has been placed in his position to serve others rather than to be served. Herod seeks his own ends, and because he does, he is immediately threatened by even the mere mention of a rival king.

But perhaps another reason Herod is afraid is that the mere presence of these wise men and their quest for God's Messiah are an announcement that the world is changing, and that nothing can remain the same as the Messiah comes. The arrival of these Gentile astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is widening considerably, that there is no longer "insider" and "outsider," but that ALL are included in God's plan for salvation.

This isn't anything new. God promised Abraham that He would bless him and bless the whole world through him. *But now it is happening.* All distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions and social backgrounds are dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

Whatever its causes, *fear is a powerful thing.* In response to their fear, Herod and the religious leaders conspire to find the Messiah and kill him. They will not succeed *this* time, but later on in the story there will again be an unholy alliance between political and religious leaders. They will not only conspire against Jesus, but they will capture him and crucify him.

Matthew's version of Jesus' nativity is definitely darker and more sober than Luke's. But it's also more realistic. The world he describes is the world in which we live. We live in a world riddled by fear. We live in a world of super storms and mass shootings and planes falling mysteriously out of the sky. We live in a world where innocents die *every day* from preventable illness and hunger. In Matthew's story of the visit of the magi – and the subsequent slaughter of the little children that follows – he renders a difficult, albeit accurate, picture of the world.

So what is Matthew's point? What is he trying to say?

Perhaps the point of Matthew's brutal realism in telling the story of Jesus' birth is that it is *precisely this world into which God has come.* It is to people like

us – people so plagued by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves – that God loves. It is this gaping need that we bear that God remedies. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. He is the promise that God has chosen to come and to live and die for us, as we are, so that in Christ’s resurrection we might experience new life, and perhaps even release from our fears.

Maybe Matthew sketches the story with darker strokes precisely so that we might perceive the glory and grace of our redemption in Christ all the more clearly.

Perhaps Denise Levertov was correct when she wrote:

*It is when we face for a moment  
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know  
the taint in our own selves, that awe  
cracks the mind’s shell and enters the heart.* (WorkingPreacher.org, December 30, 2012)

I think Matthew would agree with this.

As we come to the Lord’s Table on this Epiphany Sunday, I encourage you to come with faith. Come with the faith to see that the best way you can give your gifts to the newborn King is to use those gifts in the service of those who are in need.

And here is a piece of scandalous Good News. Even if you *don’t do that* – if you hoard and covet and cheat, and you betray those gifts because you are held hostage to fear – even then, *Emmanuel* is God’s promise that God truly has seen *who* and *what* you are, and loves you still. Today. Tomorrow. Forever.

So come with faith, and receive that love that surrounds you today. Let it fill your life with light. For that light continues to shine on in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

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