

January 6, 2019 Epiphany
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GOSPEL

Matthew 2:1-12

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the second chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘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.’ ”

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

The gospel of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

In the days and weeks after Christmas, we move from the awe of the manger’s light...to the return and re-entry into daily life...and as we put away the garland and lights...or begin to wonder when we might get around to putting it away...we might also wonder...What has really changed? How are we going to live as people changed by the presence of God in our midst this year?

Today, as we hear the story of the magi...those wise, wealthy strangers from far away...we might take a moment to marvel at the wildly varied and complex human responses to God’s arrival in our world.

We want to make things so simple sometimes...There's lots of internet memes and bumper stickers that want to claim that it's not that complicated – how we respond to the presence of God in our world...from “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” to “Coexist.” But we don't have to look far to see that it's not so simple...If it was, we'd probably agree a lot more and need Jesus a lot less. Even Scripture, itself, gives us different messages...different responses for different times and situations, perhaps. But sometimes we pick our favorite response and act like it fits every time and place. Some of us want the instruction from Romans 13 to obey secular authority to be true at all times...while others want to suggest that Esther, the magi, and Jesus himself tell us that it is our job to resist secular powers.

Rev. Phil Ruge-Jones puts it well, though...He says, “The diverse witness of the Scriptures requires wisdom in its hearer and the Spirit's guidance in its application...Sometimes God calls for submission to authority [as Paul writes in Romans 13]; but at least as often God calls us to go by another way [as in Matthew's telling of the magi's journey]; and then there are the times God announces the time is now to turn the world upside down [as Luke tells us in Mary's song].”

In and of itself, the magi's journey is a complex cross-section of human response to God's overwhelming action. They are fantastic models of tenacious, curious faith...of not letting borders or boundaries keep us from pursuing God...of looking for signs of God's presence in the world and following them beyond our comfort zones...and even, yes, of faithful resistance to human authority that is working against God. They defy Herod's command to return and tell him how he can find the newborn king and go home by a different path. That would be an excellent and affirming place to stop for those who want to feel justified in resisting human authority.

Perhaps, however, we can learn even more from them...because they are great models of civil disobedience...but they may also be good examples of the harm that can be done by well-intentioned but unaware people of privilege. I owe this insight to Rev. Emily Ewing. They pointed out something I was kind of shocked I hadn't thought about more...By showing up in and blabbing to Herod in the first place, without learning how hostile the king might be to the idea of a new king recently born in his territory...the magi arguably endangered Jesus and even indirectly led to the deaths of a huge number of children...who Herod later slaughtered in hopes of killing the young king even though he didn't know exactly who he was. We know that the Holy Family escaped to Egypt. But a huge number of innocents died because Herod heard from these wealthy strangers that a threat to his power has arrived.

Wielding power from a place of ignorance can be costly. Examples are everywhere. In a TV show *Love*, there was a fictionalized account of what might have been happening behind

the scenes at the news networks as Osama bin Laden's killing was breaking. The newsroom director is holding back broadcasting the story even after they have almost certain confirmation of its truth. He is cautious...even if it means being later than the other networks to get on the air. He says to his impatient co-workers, "Guys, in '91, I was cheering on my guy in Tel Aviv who was reporting where the scud missiles were landing. Turns out the Iraqis didn't know where the missiles were landing and I was helping them range their targets. Three killed... Whatever happened tonight, I promise you, lives and a presidency were put on the line. We're going to get this one right. And if we're two minutes late, let that be a small penance for all the ones we got wrong."

But we don't have to look to fiction or long-past history for examples of this. I recently read from an activist at the border about some of the others who have come to try to help share the stories of asylum seekers...and how they are eager to ask if they can post pictures of the people they are meeting. They want folks farther away to be able to put faces with the stories of struggle and suffering of people trying to escape danger and enter the United States. What they are missing, though, is that many people are fleeing threats in their home countries...and to have their photo shared on social media could endanger them...informing folks who wish them harm of their whereabouts or circumstances.

Good intentions without humility or adequate information can cause great harm. This, too, is a lesson from the magi.

Even when we think we've got the right angle on a situation, we can get so much wrong. Our intentions can be noble, and we can still hurt each other.

The good news is that, when we do, God stays. When his life was threatened, God didn't whisk Jesus back up into heavenly, divine safety. God didn't look at the manger...and say, "That's the best they're going to do? Well, forget it. I don't have to deal with this." Adam and Eve disobeyed...and God gave them another way to go. Sarah laughed at God's promise and was still the mother of a nation. Israel turned away from God over and over and over again...and God stayed...guided them...loved them. We get it wrong. And God stays with us...guides us...helps us find another way forward.

God stays...so we can keep learning from God... and from our mistakes... and from each other. In fact, in this harsh time... the church is arguably one of the few places where we get to begin with the premise that our failures don't define us...aren't the end of the road... that we get to stay and keep working on being better without the weight of the world on our shoulders. God has come to us, and God isn't leaving. And we get to respond the best we know how... even when we get it wrong. And tomorrow we get to try again...and again...and we get to keep learning when we miss the mark...and we get to keep seeking reconciliation...and healing...and wholeness...without having to manufacture it from scratch ourselves. Because we know we don't have those raw

materials. Only God can make love and life and wholeness out of what we have. But God has come to do just that. And we get to live in *that* world...following as best we can the stars that are still leading us to new and holy places.

For that we can say, thanks be to God. Amen.