

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt
Epiphany of Our Lord - Year C
96th Sunday of Pandemic - Masked Service
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7; 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12
01/02/2022

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

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: 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.’ ” 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 our Lord.

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Epiphany!

Good morning! If you swing by my house and come up to my bright red front door, you'll notice some writing in chalk along the top. This is from WAY back in the spring of 2017 when we blessed the house. Pastor Charlie Bang from Gloria Dei came to lead the service, and we had a wonderful time with what I think was at least 50 people at our house. The writing at the top of the door is a cross, followed by 20, then M, G, and B, followed by 17 and another cross. It roughly means that in the 2017 year of our Lord, this house was blessed. The M, G, and B, are not a reference to a small British sports car, but to traditional names given to the wise men that come to visit Jesus in our text this morning. Melchior was a king of Persia, Gaspar (or Caspar as he is sometimes called) was king of India, and Balthasar was king of Arabia.¹ I'm not totally sure how it all happened, but just as these "three kings from orient west" came to bless the infant Jesus, so too they come to bring blessings to our homes.

Douglas R.A. Hare writes that the Gospel of "*Matthew's sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and*

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 13.

artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence. Our task as Christian scholars, preachers, and teachers is to seek a deeper understanding of the story through study of its narrative details without losing our wonderment at the story as a whole."² So, with that challenge before us, we'll see what we can do.

And it really is a challenge. Because I think it's important to separate the biblical story from the 2,000 years of tradition that has been added to the text. And do all of that without losing the deeper understanding that Hare said is so important.

First, scripture doesn't make any mention of how many magi show up. So while it IS possible it was three, we don't really know. We probably started to associate the number with three because Jesus is presented three gifts. So one gift from each person. Next we need to talk about their title. We sometimes call them kings. This is because of the connection that the story has with our first reading from Isaiah 60:3 "*3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*" But they were not kings, and we definitely don't know their names. We have also called them wise men, and I think this hits a little closer. The Greek word used is μάγοι, and can have several meanings ranging from magician to astrologer. It's this last one that probably gets the closest. They are possibly followers of Zoroastrianism, which is important to the story because it lets us know that they were not Jews, but Gentiles.

Because they are Gentiles, and from out of town, they do the sensible thing and stop by to visit King Herod to ask where the infant King of the Jews could be located. It makes sense, when looking for a newly born child who will be king, go first to the current king. And because they are not

² Ibid. p. 12.

familiar with the Jewish prophecies, they do not know to look for Bethlehem. Most importantly, they don't know how dangerous Herod is. Elisabeth Johnson, a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Cameroon, writes that *“Herod the Great was well-known in the ancient world for both his paranoia and his brutality. He had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor under whom Herod ruled, is rumored to have said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. As the would-be Jewish king, Herod could not eat pork, so his pigs were safer than his progeny!”*³ As we are aware, Herod lives up to that description early on in the Gospel narrative during the slaughtering of the innocents.

The magi, living up to their nickname of wise men, go home a different way rather than stopping by when returning. But they don't leave before delivering a few gifts. Gold makes sense, as any new parent will tell you, money gets tight very quickly! Other two gifts are less obvious to us 21st century readers. Both frankincense and myrrh had a variety of uses, but could be found in perfumes. Certainly a kingly gift. But as with most symbols, they have more than one meaning and function in today's story. Again, Dr. Elisabeth Johnson lends us a hand writing: *“Both frankincense and myrrh come from the fragrant resins of trees, and both have long been used in perfumes and in the making of incense for worship. Myrrh has some very distinctive properties. The name itself means “bitter” in Arabic. Its yellowish-white resin seeps from the trunk of a small desert tree when wounded and hardens into teardrop shapes, as though the tree*

³<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-11>

itself were weeping. Once exposed to the air, its color deepens into gold, then amber, and then scarlet—like drops of blood against the bark of the trees. The resin is bitter to taste, but when ground into a powder or burned as incense, it releases an extraordinary fragrance.

Myrrh has long been used for its medicinal qualities as an antiseptic or analgesic agent. According to Mark, Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh at his crucifixion (Mark 15:23). In the ancient world, myrrh was also a common agent used for embalming the dead, and according to John's Gospel, it was used at Jesus' burial (John 19:39). As such, myrrh seems a strange gift to bring to an infant, a gift more suited for the end of life than its beginning.”⁴

But it is a fitting gift for one born such as Jesus. Not only does it point forward to his eventual death, but it points at the sickness inside of us that needs help. This child comes to bring healing to the whole world. It's something Dr. Hare points out, writing that “*Matthew 2 sharply contrasts the acceptance of the new king by Gentile strangers with violent rejection of him by the Jewish ruler... For us, the contrast can serve to symbolize the internal contrast between that part of the inner self which willingly and joyfully accepts the Lordship of Christ our king and that darker side of the self which firmly and persistently rejects his right to rule. Scoff not at Herod until you have acknowledged the Herod in yourself!*”⁵

Within all of us resides the reaction of both the magi and Herod. It is especially easy for longtime Christians to adopt the attitude of Herod and his Jewish advisors. They become so confident in their own knowledge that they completely miss the miracle that happens right before them. Likewise,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 15.

we can often seek to squash the excitement and wonderment of newcomers when they show up at our door, asking where to find the newborn king. The story serves as a wonderful reminder that the message of hope and salvation wasn't just for God's chosen people, the Jews. It's something that God wants EVERYONE to know! Just the very act of us coming together to retell the story is a reminder of how God wants all of us to share in this joy! So when something seems old and boring, remember that it might be Herod having his say in our hearts. Let us adopt attitudes of joy and gratitude for the shining star (whoever and whatever that might be) that guided our feet along the path, bringing us to the door of one whose love knows no end. Amen.