

Epiphany C 2019, January 6, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Yesterday was the twelfth day of Christmas. I hope you've enjoyed your partridge in a pear tree, turtle doves, French hens, calling birds, gold rings, laying geese, swimming swans, milking maids, dancing ladies, leaping lords, and those noisy pipers and drummers. Today is Epiphany, January 6. By this time most people around here are filled to overflowing with festivity and so the Epiphany gets a little short changed. But in lots of countries, today is as big, if not bigger, than Christmas. But Americans like to start everything early, so our feasting began last November, around Thanksgiving and hasn't let up until now. Epiphany, if it's observed at all, definitely takes a back seat.

Maybe that's good, maybe not. I'm not really sure. Part of the problem with pulling out all the festivity stops, like we do at Christmas, is that the real point of the celebration gets overlooked. I think that's true somewhat with how our larger culture celebrates Christmas. It's a little too easy to miss the full implications of what it means that God takes on our human nature, joins us in this messy, sin-filled, and death-destined world. We don't like to think about those things when we're filling ourselves with fruit-cake and fine wine. We'd rather keep it light and easy, focus on the gifts and the lights and the carols. Not that any of these are bad. I don't want to be a Scrooge and Bah Humbug anyone's joy. But these are profound, deeply significant stories that shape our faith. They're too important to treat lightly and move too quickly away from on our way to the cookie tray.

But you're here today, and today is the Epiphany and you get to hear this story. Well, at least a part of it. You see, that's a problem. We all think the story of these Wise Men following a star in order to bring gifts to the newborn King of the Jews stands on its own and that's all there is. But if you actually take the time to read the chapter from Matthew's gospel where the story is found you'll find there's a lot more. And some of it isn't very joyful or merry. The Wise Men arriving in Jerusalem provoke a real crisis. When they announce to King Herod, who is already the supposed king of the Jews, that they are looking for a new king, well, that's the crisis. Because if you're already the king and someone says there's a new king, that's just intolerable. You can hear Herod's nervousness already. He says he wants to find out where the new king is so he can himself go and honor him. We know that's just a ruse. He doesn't want to honor him. He wants to kill him, because that's what kings do to their rivals. Herod never finds out exactly who the new king is, because the Wise Men see through his evil deceit and leave the country by another way. This duplicity on their part provokes Herod into a rage. Rather than find the infant Jesus to kill him, he sends his murderous troops to Bethlehem and kills all the male children under the age of two just to make sure.

As I said, I don't want to be a Bah Humbug Scrooge on the joy of Christmas and Epiphany, but not knowing the whole story does your own faith a real disservice. Right from the very beginning of Jesus' life we hear of powerful people who oppose him, who want to try to erase him from the world stage, who can't tolerate how God is turning the world towards those who are otherwise shunned. We need to see how the cross, which will figure much later in the story, and is the story's climax, figures even here, as the infant Jesus is still helpless in the care of his parents.

But that's not to say the Wise Men don't have something to teach us on their own. They aren't here in the gospel merely as a literary device to move us to some other place. Matthew tells us about them for several reasons. First of all, who are they? He calls them "Wise Men" which is a modern translation of the word "magi" which is where we get the word "magician."

Most likely they were astrologers, people who looked to the stars to discern signs and even tell fortunes. They came from a distant land, probably somewhere in what is today Iran, Iraq, or maybe even Saudi Arabia. They certainly weren't Jews. And that's the first point Matthew wants us to know. Even at his birth Jesus begins to draw in people from other nations. His life will be for Israel and the Jews, but not just for Israel and the Jews. It will be for all people; every nation, every tribe, every language and clan.

What about those gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh? We all know what gold is. It's still considered a rare and precious gift, suitable for any king or queen. Frankincense and myrrh are both a form of incense, harvested from two different kinds of trees which grow in the Arabian peninsula. Both were burned as a fragrant incense in the Temple in Jerusalem, and both are considered quite valuable. Myrrh, is a bit different than frankincense, however. Myrrh is also used as a pain-reliever when mixed with wine. It was also used in burial ceremonies in which a body would be wrapped in a shroud with myrrh. Mark the gospel writer tells us when Jesus was hanging on the cross he was given wine mixed with myrrh to drink, as a pain reliever. John, the gospel writer, reports that Nicodemus went to Jesus' tomb with a hundred pounds of myrrh to properly bury Jesus. The gifts themselves are a foreshadowing of Jesus' life and ministry. The gold points to his being a king, but his kingdom will be unlike any other, where the last will become first and the first last. The frankincense points to his being a priest, but not offering sacrifices in a temple, but offering his own body as a sacrifice for sin and death. And the myrrh; this also points to the shape of his life; that through his own suffering and death on the cross the world might receive God's gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation.

These strange outsiders, these wise men from the east, with their unusual gifts for a baby, show us that this birth is changing the world in unexpected ways. But there are those today who do not want to see the gift of the magi, and who are threatened by any change to the accepted order. That's how Herod reacted. Because the gifts brought by the wise men point to the one who is God's own gift of himself for the world. And while Jesus does indeed draw all people to himself, there will always be those who oppose him and the kingdom he brings. Because his kingship and his priesthood always sides with the poor, and those who suffer at the hands of the powerful and privileged of this world.

Today we bring to a close all the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. We've heard from Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds and the angels, and finally these wise men from the east. I hope you've come to realize something important about these stories. The gospel writers Matthew and Luke tell them because they want us to know what kind of child this is, and what he will grow up to become. Even though Jesus doesn't really do anything in these stories except be born, already the world is starting to change. The poor take heart because they perceive in this birth that God has heard their prayers and is answering them. Those who longed for the messiah rejoice because now he has arrived. Outsiders, from shepherds to wise men, are now drawn into the circle of faith. Kings on their thrones begin to quake in fear for a new king who brings in a new kind of kingdom is born. The world has indeed changed because Jesus was born into our world. These sacred stories lead us, like the star led the wise men, to Christ where we too may offer the gifts of our lives in service of the Lord. Amen.