

**Christ Church Episcopal in Harwich Port, MA**  
**Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany, observed January 5, 2014**  
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Matthew says of the wise kings from the East, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (Matthew 2:12).

Today, as the Sunday closest to the Epiphany, we read the Gospel story through Matthew’s version of the wise kings from the East who came to worship the new King of Israel. King Herod asked them to find the new baby whose birth had stirred up the world, it seemed, and inform him, so as the king of Judea, he could worship him as well. But what the baby had stirred up was competition with Herod as King of the Jews.

The Romans appointed King Herod as King of Judea in 37 BCE. Jesus was probably born around 6 BCE. Historians agree that in many respects Herod had a hugely successful reign. King Herod, ethnically Arab but a practicing Jew, increased the land he governed from Palestine to parts of modern Jordan, Lebanon and Syria constructing fortresses, aqueducts and amphitheaters and earned him the title 'Herodes Magnus', Herod the Great.

The Romans also gave Herod the title 'King of the Jews' because of the Jewish population he ruled. The title of 'King of the Jews' begins to explain the impression we have of Herod from the Bible. The Bible shapes the popular conception we now have of Herod as a King who was proud of his title and would do anything to keep it.

So now the birth of a new King of the Jews was imminent and threatened Herod's position and so Herod orders the massacre of the infants who would be about Jesus’ age. Ironically, the extra-Biblical history of the first century does not include this story and we

hear it only in Matthew. However, Herod's life was one of ruthless political expediency; although the historical evidence for the massacre of infants is exclusively Biblical it appears entirely possible that King Herod was capable of the atrocity. So after the wise astrologers and kings of the East made the long journey to see Jesus, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and they went home by another way, Matthew tells us.

As Matthew's story continues, an angel tells Joseph to flee his home and head into exile, thus thwarting Herod's efforts to get rid of him.

Because we read Matthew's theology as seeing Jesus as the new Moses, we see distinct parallels of Moses and Jesus. Moses also comes out of Egypt to lead God's people out of slavery to the promised land, and Jesus, born in Bethlehem, comes out of Egypt once Herod is dead, to live in Nazareth of Galilee, because Herod's son Archelaus is now ruling Judea.

Matthew prepares a prophetic path for Jesus to walk. A seeming detour into Egypt is actually a prophetic call; even Jesus' hometown reverberates with prophetic resonance.

Potential doom looms over these early chapters of Matthew. Jesus' welcome to the world is not unanimous acclamation but fear that this child would subvert the order of the world, that a mere child would weaken the powerful. The arbitrariness of Herod would have been entirely familiar to ancient people living under Rome's long imperial shadow.

Therefore, Matthew's trust in the prophetic promises is not mere naiveté; his faith is not simple. The narrative of these threats upon Jesus' life bristle with authenticity for such tyranny was well known to ancient peoples. Matthew's trust in God's providence emerges from a faith that expects God to reign in a world where the dominance of the powerful seems unchangeable.

In the midst of the joys of the Christmas season, these passages are a ripe reminder that things might have been otherwise, that tragedy and disappointment are too often the orders of the day, even amidst the revelry of this holiday season. As the poet Jane Kenyon once wrote, "It might have been otherwise." As the evangelist Matthew might have added, "...but what had been spoken by the prophets was fulfilled."

So while the story Matthew tells may be dark and difficult, it isn't even a little bit far-fetched. Which is why, of course, he tells it. To let us know that in Jesus, Emmanuel, God did indeed draw near to us, took on our lot and our life, and experienced and endured all that we did -- disappointment, fear, violence, even death. All so that we would know that we are not alone -- that we do not suffer alone, fear alone, live and die alone.

Sometimes life is beautiful and wonderful and filled with goodness and grace. And God is a part of that, giving blessing and celebrating with us and for us. And sometimes life is hard, disappointing, and filled with heartache. And God is part of that as well, holding on to us, comforting us, blessing us with promise that God will stay with us through the good and the bad, drawing us ever more deeply into God's loving embrace and promising that nothing -- not even death -- will separate us from God.

And the promise to all of us that God is with us, Emmanuel, holding onto us through the joys and sorrows, working through the triumphs and tragedies that attend our lives -- all to share the news of the salvation God has wrought in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus, the one hailed as king at his birth by the wise ones bearing kingly gifts, and at his death in mockery as 'King of the Jews' written above his head on the cross.

The Christmas story begins with the birth of a child. But it doesn't end until this child has grown up, preached God's mercy, been crucified and died and then raised again. Actually, it doesn't end until Jesus draws all of us into that same story, raising us up to new life even amid the very real challenges that face each of us here and now.

This story matters because it tells us the truth: the sometimes difficult truth of unjust rulers and violence and private grief and personal pain and all the rest. But also the always hopeful truth that God has not stood back at a distance, but in Jesus has joined God's own self to our story and is working -- even now, even here -- to grant us new life that we may not just endure but flourish, experiencing resurrection joy and courage in our daily lives and sharing our hope with others.

So let us recognize Jesus as King of the Jews, who was not only recognized at his birth, but also as he was revealed to the nations, when those kings, who were not of the Hebrew faith, but probably Zoroastrians, also saw him as a light to the nations.

What I love about the painting on your bulletin cover today is that it takes us outside Matthew's story of a Palestinian baby born to a Jewish couple and his being worshipped by Asian kings. We see Jesus in another culture, a Chinese baby worshipped by foreigners, who present him kingly gifts. As the light to the nations, Jesus is also a light to us in the West-- we who have been handed this story down through generations of the faithful who told the story to their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren—the story of how God kept God's promise to bring the Anointed One, the Messiah, to the world for the salvation of God's people Israel and the Gentiles or the Nations.

The wise ones from the East had a Zoroastrian tradition that had taught them a faith that believed in one God and waited for a virgin-born savior. Their trip could have taken months

or even years as they were determined to find this new king. They had studied the stars as part of their priestly training, and they followed a configuration of the stars or a comet, but at the same time, they were also seeking a phenomenon of faith. You see they had hoped to find the one who will lead the world to peace.

So this story in Matthew is important even in our own day for us. We know the story. God become incarnate in human flesh, God who was the Word at the beginning of creation was the Word made flesh, the word Jesus, the Christ, the Anointed One, the word described by John the evangelist this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, \* and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1-6).

While Matthew's version is different, the Light is the same--The Light that shone in a darkened world in great need of a savior, the light that wise ones sought in the Middle East just a few years before the Common Era, the Light of Creation that became enfleshed for humankind that God loved so much. That Light was not just for Israel or Palestine, but for the nations, and for us.

The wise ones sought that Light as we do. They were spiritual seekers, as we are. The journey is what matters most, the seeking, not the arriving. We are all seekers and during this season now that lasts until Lent, let us seek the Light of Christ for our own spiritual journeys. A former colleague of mine says it so much better than I could, so let me read from her blog, "Stone of Witness." She's a priest in Texas now, but I knew her in Washington. She was a close friend of Judy Upham, who was Jonathan Myrick Daniel's fiancée. This is what Lauren says:

Seeking is a gift, however. God invites us to seek—graces us with curiosity. We are drawn by the stars of our own needs and desires. All of us are invited to seek even if our faith is secure. We seek to know more of God. The Magi sought to find the Prince of Peace—the virgin-born Savior of their own tradition and they found Jesus. We often seek through reading Scripture or studying how the Church has believed over the generations. It is of God's nature to be found. God does not avoid us as we seek. If we go looking for God, we will find. The door will be opened to us.

Some of us need to allow ourselves to be sought. God seeks us just as surely as we seek God. We need to allow ourselves to be quiet enough for God to speak to us, to allow ourselves to be encountered by the holy One. But sometimes we have to let go of looking in what we have always thought were the right places. The Magi thought they were supposed to go to Jerusalem to find the Christ Child—their directions were not as fine-tuned as they thought. Their GPS was nine miles off—their goal was in Bethlehem [not in the metropolitan city].

Seeking allows us to see the world in different eyes—God’s eyes. Seeking allows us to see the parts of the world that are not our own and have compassion for people who are different from us. It was the Magi’s compassion that led them not to return to Herod to tell where the Christ child was.

Throughout this Epiphany season we will seek the Light of Christ in our readings. The Light of Christ may be a star in the sky or the warmth of caring, or the delving into learning to know more of Christ. It may be us bringing the darkness of our world into the Light so that we may find some way to conquer that darkness with the love of God.<sup>1</sup>

And so I return to He Qi’s painting as a window into a world different from ours, different from our story, different from the story of a baby born in Bethlehem to Palestinian Jews., but our story after all, as Jesus, the Christ, the Light of the World comes to all the nations, and especially to us as we seek him in our world, in our church, in our faith.

“I invite you this season to find the places where God is calling you to seek the truth of God’s love. It may be in the old—in the history of faith. It may be in the future hope that God gives. It may be in the here and now. God may be calling you to bring the darkness of the world into the Light. God may be calling you to explore issues that are difficult with the Light who has come into the world. But in all those places, God is with you, saving you, and opening your horizons to a greater faith”<sup>2</sup>. AMEN.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lauren Gough, Stone of Witness blog for January 4, 2014, “Gifts of the Magi,” at: <http://stoneofwitness.blogspot.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Some ideas in this sermon are from “Working Preacher,” a blog from Luther Seminary (<http://www.workingpreacher.org/>)