

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2020

How Wise Are We? Matthew 2:1-12

The word epiphany with a small e simply means manifestation. When the church uses the word Epiphany with a capital E it means, specifically, God's manifestation of God's self in the person, life, and acts of Jesus Christ. In Epiphany stories we see the divine acting through the human as has been done in no other time. During the liturgical season of Epiphany, we read stories about Jesus baptism, the changing of water into wine at the wedding of Cana, healings and nature miracles performed by Jesus, and Jesus' transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany.

Today's story is the first of our epiphany stories – Matthew's story of the magi, the ones we call "wise men," being led by divine providence to see the child Jesus. "First" because this story is always read on the first day of the Epiphany season and sets the tone for the rest of the season. More importantly, "first" because, in the traditional interpretation of the Church, this story signifies God's first manifestation of God's self to the gentiles. The star over Bethlehem tells us that in this season we are not talking about God's whispering in our ears, but God shouting, not just to Israel, but to the whole world at the top of God's lungs. The star is like a light bulb that appears over our heads when we get the idea: "This little kid – Jesus is 'God with us.'"

Indeed, this is our story. It is our story because we, like those wise men, are gentiles.

We were not at Sinai or the crossing of the Red Sea; we were not ruled by David and Solomon; we did not worship in the Temple at Zion; but we were there when the star slapped us in the face and said that a king given by God was just born. Epiphany is our day – the day for gentiles. This story is our story – the story for gentiles.

Our story opens with those gentile wise men from the east questioning Herod concerning the whereabouts of the child-king whose birth the appearance of the great star proclaimed. Herod was the king of the Jews – a vassal of the Roman Empire – ruling in Jerusalem. When the wise men told him of the purpose for their journey, he and all of his Jerusalem cronies got worried. A threat to his throne was sounded in this birth, in this star, in this pilgrimage. He, too, wanted to know where the child-king was. He wanted to know where to go to murder him. You see, Herod's kingship was the total opposite of Jesus' kingship. He was everything Jesus Christ is not: Hateful, power-hungry, insecure, destructive, deceitful. (Can't you just imagine Jack Nicholson being cast as the perfect Herod in an epiphany movie?)

Herod's chief priests and scribes told him that according to the prophet Micah, the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem. Assuming the wise men would do his leg-work for him, he called them to him secretly and found out precisely when the star appeared in the sky, thus showing his "genuine" interest in the child-king while at the same time finding out how old the child might be.

With the face of an altar boy but the heart of Darth Vader, Herod sent them to Bethlehem to find the child-king, asking only that after finding him they return to Jerusalem to tell him where he was, so that he, too, might go worship the child...and present him the gift of a sword.

During their six-mile journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the wise men saw the star re-appear and lead them to the house where the child-king and his parents lived. There they fell down and worshipped this Divine King, and the gospel of Matthew tells us that, in accordance with the prophet Isaiah, they gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh. Having fulfilled what they came for, they departed. But they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod in Jerusalem, so they returned home secretly by another route.

After they had gone, Joseph also had a dream, in which an angel told him to get his family and go as quickly as possible, "Go directly to Egypt. There is no time to waste. Herod will soon be on his way to Bethlehem to kill the child-king. Get to Egypt and hide there until it is safe to come back." And they went. Meanwhile, back at the palace, Herod realized that he had been tricked: The wise men had sneaked back east without telling him where the child-king was. In a desperate rage, Herod dispatched his soldiers to Bethlehem to slaughter all of the male children who were two years old or younger, hoping to kill that child-king before the throne was lost to him. But no king can destroy God's anointed Messiah. However, a king can destroy the lives of a lot of innocent children of Bethlehem.

A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; She refused to be consoled, because they were no more. We all remember how the parents at Sandy Hook School shared that same anguish 8 years ago.

After Herod's death, Joseph was able to bring his family back to Judea, because the child-king had been momentarily forgotten. However, evil threats against God's anointed had not disappeared. Herod's son, Archelaus, now sat on the throne. So, Joseph and Mary were forced to raise Jesus in Nazareth instead of Bethlehem.

This story is worth re-telling in detail because, as I said it is our story, the story for us gentiles. It is not just a "Bible story" of way back then. It is not just a story about Jesus. It is our story now. It is our story about the way things are now. You see, things have not changed so much in two thousand years. All of the characters of the story are still around, they just look different. As I already said, we are those gentile magi to whom God has revealed God's self in the child-king. We may not ride camels and make pilgrimages to Bethlehem, but we are today's "wise men." (A scary thought, isn't it?)

That Christ is still around is evident by our gathering for worship this morning. We gentile wise people see this child-king when we share the bread and cup of Holy Communion, when we watch children at play, when we hear the Hallelujah Chorus, when the waters of baptism splash over a newborn's forehead, when we pray for an old friend, when we sing hymns of the liturgy.

Yes, today, right now in this sanctuary, we, the wise people, worship this child-king, who is very much “still around.” But we have a problem. As the wise men and the child-king still exist, so does Herod. In fact, we have come to this place by way of Herod. You know Herod. He’s the evil that so often exerts its power in the world, in our world. He rules in the ghettos, and in the shut-in’s loneliness, and in the power struggle in the middle east, and in the slaughter of innocents in our country these last years, and in the opioids that ruin people’s lives,

See, not a lot has changed, but the characters are all still around. But, unlike those first wise men, we wise people know the end of the story. Those first wise men went home by another way in order to protect the child-king from Herod, but we know that not even a tomb can defeat the King of Glory: He rules forever. However, knowing the whole story means we wise people also realize that if we simply avoid Herod and go home by another route, he will kill the innocent children of Bethlehem. Unlike those first wise men, we wise people have the choice to stay in Bethlehem and fight Herod in the name of the child-king. Knowing the end of the story, I am not sure we would be justified in dropping off our gifts here at the child-king’s home and then sneaking back to our homes without giving aid to the children of Bethlehem who live outside these church walls. Indeed, would our fighting for those in need not manifest Christ to the world like an exploding new star shining over our community?

Yet, it is true: Herod will still be around long after we are dead and gone, no matter how well we fight. If the birth and manifestation of God's own Son did not rid the world of Herod, we cannot expect to have the power to completely destroy him. We cannot end world hunger, or heal all of the AIDS victims, or care for all the people who have suffered from the earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding and tornadoes or disarm all of the world's weapons, or to stop all pollution, or to keep emotionally-disturbed people from killing innocent victims. Killing Herod will not get rid of his demonic reign. Archelaus will simply take the throne. Evil and suffering are around to stay no matter how well we fight. And if that is true, it seems as if fighting Herod is futile and stupid. If we cannot stop Herod anyway, the wise choice would seem to be going home by another route and at least saving ourselves.

But there is another old "preachy" story that we might – ought to claim as ours today, now: As an old man was walking down the beach, he noticed a young girl ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea. When he came up to her, he questioned her actions. She explained that a starfish stranded on the beach when the tide went out would die if left in the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish," challenged the old man, "how can your efforts make any difference?" The young girl looked down the stretch of beach at all of the stranded starfish and then stared at the one in her hand. As she pitched it back into the salt-water waves, she answered, "It makes a difference to this one."

It's nearing the time to leave this place of worship, the child-king's home.

What will we choose? Will we "wise people go home by another route and avoid Herod? Or will we stay in Bethlehem and fight Herod knowing that we can't save the world from evil but only bits and pieces of it, only an innocent child now and then? Which will we choose? Just how wise are we?