

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They 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.'"

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

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They were darker times, the time of King Herod after Jesus was born. Darker socially, darker politically, even darker physically. Less than 100 years ago, everyone on the planet could look up on a clear night and see a spectacular starry night sky. Today, the increasingly widespread use of artificial light at night means that fewer and fewer people ever experience the stunning sight of the arm of the Milky Way where our island planet floats.

And so, we can only guess at what the night sky looked like 2,000 years ago, when a comet caught the attention of a group of Persian star-gazers. They saw celestial events like the arrival of this light moving in the velvet sky as an omen. Consulting their charts and manuscripts, they concluded that the light was a Divine announcement of the birth of a new king for the Jewish people. And trusting that information, they set off toward Jerusalem on a grueling and lengthy trek to fall down before the new king in adoration.

Now, despite some of our most cherished traditions, Matthew never refers to these people as "kings" and we have no idea whether there were three or thirty. Even to call them "wise men" falls short as does the term "astrologers." In fact, many recent translations of scripture have restored the more accurate word, "magi."

In the ancient Middle East, the magi were a Zoroastrian priestly caste of high-ranking political and religious advisors who had enormous influence with the rulers of the Median and Persian Empires; rival neighbors who had been chipping away at Roman territory for years.

These were the people in Matthew's story, the magi, who arrived at Herod's courts asking, "Where is the newborn King of the Judaeans?" The magi naturally assumed that the newborn king must be one of Herod's sons. A natural assumption, if not especially wise. As clever as they were at reading the stars and planets, they were somewhat less skilled at reading international politics.

To say that Herod was frightened is an understatement. He panicked. The Roman Senate had appointed him as a puppet king of the Judeans. He was a Jew in name only. He was not only famously cruel to the people who built and paid for the ambitious construction projects that he hoped would anchor his legacy, he also murdered three of his own sons.

The merest hint of a competitor caught Herod off guard and in his self-righteous rage, Matthew tells us that he launched a campaign of brutality and terror beyond anything that the magi could have read in the stars. Herod, feeling as though the magi had made a fool of him, dispatched his troops to kill all the male children in and around the town of Bethlehem who were two years old or younger.

Now, it's true that Herod is a deceitful, unprincipled, self-important villain in Matthew's story. It's also true that he is not wrong about the threat that the infant Jesus poses, though he *is* afraid of the wrong outcomes.

He can't possibly know that Jesus will never call up a conquering army or challenge the throne of Caesar with earthly power. He could never have imagined that Jesus would gather billions of followers over the course of 2,000 years. Or that his teachings would confront the powers of *all* human empires built on fear, domination and violence.

No, here in Matthew's story, Jesus is still a babe in arms. More than his actions, his existence, his being, his very essence is the more troubling problem for the earthly powers-that-be. The existence of the Christ-child is a formidable realization, an awe-inspiring announcement, that God is here among us, with us and within us.

Just so, the magi are not the center of the feast of Epiphany. They were pilgrims in the time after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, just as we are invited to be pilgrims this morning.

Herod is not the center of the feast of Epiphany, as mesmerizing as his deadly, self-protective politics are. He was a man clutching to power and authority and selfish security, just like the shadow that lurks in all our hearts, whether we are aware of that potential or not.

Even the star in the night sky, the comet or asteroid or whatever astronomical event it was is not the center of the feast of Epiphany. The light of Christ is always the center – always has been.

With an infant born into Bethlehem of Judea came a fullness of life and light that had never been known before. An abundance and brilliance that is still unbearable to those who seek only to protect their own narrow interests and constricted hearts.

As soon as the magi took their first steps toward Jerusalem, God was with them. As soon as they sought, God led them *because* they sought, even in flawed ways. And so, after innocently alerting Herod to a genuine threat, the magi rode on to Bethlehem, where they encountered what they were looking for and so much more; the still, quiet presence of God embodied in a baby in the arms of his loving mother.

In the city where King David was born, they made offerings to the child that were appropriate not just for a new earthly king, but for a god. And then, being warned in a dream, they did not return to Herod as the treacherous, self-serving king had commanded. Instead, they gathered themselves up, climbed on their camels or horses, and left for home by another road, leaving behind any further mention of them.

Our skies may not be as pristinely dark as they once were. Even so, the light that drew the magi still shines. That same light still calls to us and our own restlessness urges us to go to it.

“Even the *yearning* of the inner person,” Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner wrote, “for freedom, for goodness, for bliss, even the *regret* that we are weak, sinful people – these, too, are stars. Why do you yourself push clouds in front of the star – the clouds of bad temper, of disappointment, of bitterness, of refusal, clouds of sneering or of giving up – because your dreams and expectations have not been realized?”

Every time we gather at this table for the Eucharist, we gather at the manger. We also gather at the temple where Jesus taught and the homes where he healed the sick. We gather at the foot of the cross and at the mouth of the empty tomb. We gather to bring the offerings of our entire being. And God transfigures these and gives them back.

At the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a Benedictine nun named Mechthild of Hackeborn and her sisters produced a remarkable book of mysticism in which one of the nuns captures a vision. On the vigil of Epiphany one year, Sr. Mechthild was talking with Christ in prayer. After taking communion, Christ spoke to her and said this:

“Behold, I give you gold, which is my divine love; incense, which is all my holiness and devotion; and myrrh, which is the bitterness of my whole passion. I give you these gifts as your own so that you can give them back to me as though they were yours. When a soul does this, I return the same gifts to her double. If she offers them to me again, every time she does this, I return to her double.”

As we prepare this table for the Feast of Epiphany, we bring all that we are to be blessed, to be shared and returned to us double; God’s own divine love, given, blessed, doubled and returned; the purity of God’s own holiness and the fruits of God’s own passion, given, blessed, doubled and returned; the very life of God-with-us given in blessed bread and wine. Doubled and returned.

What insights then – that is to say, what epiphanies will come to those who have seen the star at its rising and have come seeking? What gifts will be doubled and returned for us to give others?

The light of Epiphany prompts us to watch as we return to our homes, by camel or by car. To expect unexpected encounters with Christ – often still an infant – in those we meet along the way. The light has dawned if we will only awaken and open our eyes to see.

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