

Faith Mennonite Church
Epiphany – January 6, 2008

Enlightened or Frightened?

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Somewhere in ancient Persia or Babylon or Syria some observant folks, Matthew calls them “magi,” spotted a new star in the heavens. The word “magi” originally referred to a caste of Persian priests who interpreted dreams, so they may have been Persian. But it was the Babylonians who developed the practice of astrology, so perhaps they were from Babylon. But the gifts these visitors brought to Jesus – gold, frankincense, and myrrh—point to origins in Arabia or the Syrian Desert (Harrington). It’s also from the number of gifts—three—that tradition has derived the number of nativity visitors that we sing about in Christmas and Epiphany carols.

The fact that we have to deduce and intuit these details suggests that they weren’t central to Matthew’s story. What was important to Matthew was that non-Jewish persons from outside of Israel/Palestine had noticed a phenomenon in the heavens that they interpreted to signal the birth of the “king of the Jews.” Although Matthew’s gospel was written largely for a Jewish audience and is concerned with showing Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish law and prophesy, he begins and ends his gospel with outsiders—gentiles—proclaiming Jesus the “king of the Jews.” Here it is the magi from the east who make this proclamation; at his crucifixion it is the Romans who place an inscription on his cross denoting this title and a centurion observing Jesus’ death who proclaims, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” At his birth and at his death, Jesus stretches the boundaries of the kingdom. His reign is universal. There is no longer a single, chosen people, but God, the creator of all, desires that all come to the Light. So the story is about inclusion.

But it is also about the meaning of kingship. Matthew contrasts two kings at the beginning of his gospel. Herod the Great was appointed “king of the Jews” by the Roman senate in 40 BC and he gained control of Jerusalem in 37 BC. He was a masterful politician who succeeded in playing off Roman and Jewish factions against each other. He was also cruel and ruthless, even with his own family members (Harrington). He was not himself Jewish, and in fact had fled to Rome at one point because of Jewish opposition to his rule. When he returned to Judea he took a Jewish wife, Mariamne, to gain Jewish favor, but that only increased the Jewish opposition to him. In time he had Mariamne killed, and later killed their two sons, accusing them of inciting a revolt (Encarta).

Herod represents a king who rules from above, put in place by a foreign, occupying power, with no intentions of representing the people over whom he rules. Power is about self-preservation and self-interest. He ruled to forcefully control rather than to empower the people. He had not studied the history of the people he ruled and didn’t know the messianic tradition that said the Messiah would come from Bethlehem of Judea. For all his power, and backing from Rome, he was essentially insecure, fearing anything and anyone who might in some way threaten his rule.

In contrast, Matthew’s genealogy in chapter one, places Jesus squarely within the historical Jewish community, a descendent of King David, whose own greatness we will recall, began as the youngest of his shepherding family. In fact, according to the writings in 1 Samuel, when the prophet Samuel arrived at Bethlehem to anoint one of the sons of Jesse to replace Saul,

the first king of Israel, David wasn't even in the line-up. Jesse had left his youngest boy out tending the sheep while the rest of the family went to Samuel's sacrifice.

In a similar way, Jesus is recognized as "king of the Jews" not through appointment of an imperial power, but by being birthed into a humble family, with little earthly security beyond their faith in God. Jesus would grow up learning his tradition and his community's sacred text – hanging out in the temple at age 12 – and later choosing common folk as his inner circle – the fishermen, women who weren't content to stay at home, and even a tax collector. His words were words of love and healing. And in the face of insult and accusation he trusted his past actions and words, not a shrewd team of lawyers, to defend himself. In the end, he absorbed and took on himself the hate, the criticism, the deeply entrenched systemic sin, the wounds of society as he was nailed to the cross and died. His was a self-giving power, infused with love.

A third component of this story, interwoven in the threads of inclusion and meaning of kingship and power, is the aspect of light. Our Isaiah text for this morning began, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." We have here an interaction of light. The glory of God rises upon God's people and they are to shine. The nations will come to the light of God's people; kings will see the brightness of the dawn of that kingdom.

The magi saw the light of a star and followed. It brought them to the baby whom they worshiped and gave gifts fit for a king. Herod on the other hand, not only missed the star, but missed his own opportunity to kneel before true light and, in turn, shine, because he responded in fear rather than following.

We are gathered here today as a company of magi. We come because we are drawn to the light of Christ. Like the magi, some of us might feel like outsiders or beginners on the journey; we didn't grow up with a genealogy like that of Jesus or one that connects us by blood to the 16th century Anabaptist/Mennonite movement. But just as Jesus called humble folk, fishermen, tax collectors, and independent women, he invites all of us into the light. Those who have been following for a longer time, perhaps all our lives, still need to pause and make sure we don't take the light for granted or find ways to keep parts of our life shaded.

Often, it's easier to see the light and the path in hindsight. We wonder where in the world God's light is leading us only to see God's hand clearly when we look back and reflect on where we've come. Wendell Berry in his poem, "Given," wrote:

We travelers, walking to the sun, can't see
Ahead, but looking back the very light
That blinded us shows us the way we came,
Along which blessings now appear, risen
As if from sightlessness to sight, and we,
By blessing brightly lit, keep going toward
That blessed light that yet to us is dark.

We have just begun a new year. Let us take a moment of silence to reflect on ways that we experienced God's light in the year just past. And then, take a moment to think of the

coming year: where are the places in your life, or in the life of the world, into which you would like to invite God's light, to illumine, to guide, to make you shine?

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Berry, Wendell Berry, "Given," *Sabbaths* 1999.

Encarta. http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761570553/Herod_the_Great.html.

Harrington, S.J., Daniel J., *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press 1991.