

January 2, 2011

Matthew 2

### **Presents and Consequences**

As so many are already putting Christmas behind them by taking down their decorations and boxing them up for another year... returning those gifts that weren't quite right or couldn't otherwise be re-gifted...while we have even begun looking forward into the new year... the Magi are just now arriving with their presents for the Christ child. On this second Sunday in the Christmas season we celebrate Epiphany... although Epiphany itself won't officially arrive until this coming Thursday when the twelfth day of Christmas gets here. So I invite you to listen once again for the Word of God as it speaks to you this morning this time from the gospel according to Matthew.

#### **READ**

The last time we gathered together, on Christmas Eve, we heard the Christmas story as told by the writer of Luke's gospel. That story has so much of the drama and the excitement that we look forward to hearing every Christmas. Luke gives us the whole manger scene with all of its charm... the census and the need to leave Nazareth for Bethlehem ... there being no room at the inn... the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in the manger... the heavenly host and the shepherds coming to see the newborn Jesus and then heading off into the night praising God. It's a great and joyous scene.... and little wonder that that's the scene that captures our imaginations the most at Christmastime... so much so that we have tortuously blended into this manger scene a few of the story elements of Matthew's gospel. So we place a star over the stable and we add these three Magi with their presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And their

camels are there as well... we can't forget their camels. Good thing this Christmas story takes place at the stable or there would be no room for the camels.

Over the years the Magi have had their image pumped up. Tradition has added all manner of details to describe them. But despite the hymn that we will sing this morning... these were astrologer priests from the east and not kings... and nowhere does it say in Matthew that there were three of them... only three presents are mentioned so that's become in our traditions one present for each Magi to carry and present. And notice how I said that they were astrologers and not astronomers... the wisdom of these Magi comes from studying the star signs... or in other words, these Magi are adept at horoscopes and the like... that is their wisdom. Although we hang a literal star over the manger, the Magi were reading astrological charts... there is a star rising in the house of Virgo and that sort of thing. So much of what we think we know about these Magi... like their names or what they would have looked like following that beacon star... and that they arrive at the manger on the night of Jesus' birth... all this and more has been imagined and added over the years through stories, art and song... and in a way a new Magi story has been created that connects nicely to the joyous manger scene from Luke's gospel... one that focuses on the presents that the Magi bring... but this new Magi story eliminates the story of the consequences of their arrival.

Our placing the Magi at the stable unfortunately means that we overlook this story from Matthew's gospel. What we have in Luke and in Matthew are two very different and wholly independent stories of Jesus' birth and early childhood. Admittedly Matthew's story isn't as marketable as Luke's... it's harder to make a decoration out of it... it's not a scene befitting the proper mood of the season. Still... this morning I want you to pretend that you don't know

anything about Luke's manger scene and focus with me just for just a little while on Matthew's tale.

Matthew tells a much darker story. His is a story of unintended consequences. The Magi in their imperfect astrological wisdom head first to the place where they would naturally expect to find a newborn king... to Jerusalem... bearing their expensive presents fit for just such an occasion. But the birth has already happened elsewhere and unaware to the powers in Jerusalem. Herod is taken by surprise and Herod was one of those men who did not like to be taken by surprise... especially with this type of news. These Magi on his doorstep constitute a threat to him and not a cause for celebration.

Here's an important piece for us to notice with this story. No one in Jerusalem is expecting anything to happen before the Magi arrive. Not Herod... not even his wise advisors who are in the prophetic know... even they aren't expecting anything to happen even though they know something is supposed to happen... someday. Funny how someday rarely gets thought of as today. For me, this is the first challenge of Epiphany. Although Epiphany, strictly speaking, is supposed to be the remembrance of the gospel spreading to the gentiles... I also like to think about the other meaning of epiphany when it comes to this story. Having that insight... that "aha" moment... you know what I mean... having an epiphany... that moment when the lightbulb comes on. When the Magi appear in Jerusalem, the "aha" moments begin. The Magi realize there is more here than what they had assumed they would find. Herod realizes the limits of his power if the Messiah has been born. His advisors realize their knowledge of God is useless unless they are actively using it to look for God at work in their time. The wise advisors of Herod's know what they should be looking for... they are able to give the correct answer...

but they don't embrace the consequence of their knowledge. You know, I'm always a bit disappointed that these chief priests and scribes don't have another scene in this story where they redeem themselves in some way... where they ask to go with the Magi to find the child. These wise advisors make me think about us... the church... and what happens when Christmas comes around each year. We have the knowledge. We know the story just like they knew the story. But how willing or how much do we embrace the consequence of our Christmas knowledge?

In contrast to Herod's wise advisors, the Magi do go forward and now, knowing a little more than when they arrived at Jerusalem, manage to go straight to the home in Bethlehem where the family is living. They give their presents, but now they have become intertwined in the consequences of their arrival. As I said earlier, Herod realizes the limits of his power. That is his epiphany. And so he resolves to use the power he does have to disguise those limits... to hide them from view. He sets to manipulating the Magi for his own purposes... and I think that is what he intends at this point in the story. If this is the child of prophecy... if this is the promised Messiah... maybe he can use this child to his own ends. Maybe he can use this child to his own purposes and prop up his own power. "Tell me where the child is so I can pay him homage and manipulate the situation to my own advantage." Herod is the epitome of politics and his story has been repeated from his day to today into tomorrow. Politics and other powers seek to use this child for their own purposes... to increase their own power. Think of the consequences that have resulted from all the Herod's through the years. How many individual politicians have taken their homage and twisted it to their own ends... ends that betray the purpose of the child that they claim to be honoring? How many governments have claimed the child and wreaked havoc and death in the child's name? Or... if you're not into history... all we need to do is look

and see what the corporate and commercial powers have done in the name of paying homage to this child in Bethlehem... our modern Christmas which is not about the salvation of the world but about the salvation of our economy's bottom line. Herod's story is not confined to a single character in history. And his reaction when he has the epiphany that he won't be able to manipulate the situation... that is not confined to history either. If he can't use the child to his own ends... he will destroy the child. Isn't it interesting that an epiphany can also mean the death of innocents? (pause)

At this point, we need to mention Joseph. Joseph is a point of light in this story because Joseph shows obedience. In Matthew's Christmas story, Joseph is the hero. When we read about Joseph a few weeks ago, he was told to put away his fear and to follow his calling... to take the pregnant Mary as his wife and to claim her unborn child as his own. In Matthew's story, Joseph is again called upon to be the good man that he is... he is called upon to be the father he is meant to be. Joseph is obedient to God and he protects his family. He serves without thought of reward or cost... but does only what is right. When it is necessary to go to Egypt, he obeys and goes to Egypt. When it is time to return, he obeys and ... returns and when he cannot return to his home in Bethlehem, he goes to Nazareth to settle there. If Herod's advisors are us when we are not at our best... when we do not take seriously the consequence of our knowledge of the Christ child... then Joseph would be the church at its best... when we follow our calling from God with a willing obedience... even into the unknown. Joseph's journey is so condensed that it can be easy to miss, but his journey is like so many congregations who learn that they can't stay in one place... that they must move on if they are to properly nurture the child that has been given to them. When Joseph cannot return to the familiar home of Bethlehem... I can't help but think

about how congregations who want to return to the familiar home of the past... to what they know... but to do so isn't the safe place they imagine it to be... it isn't the place that will fulfill what has been spoken by the prophets.

And so that finally brings us back to the Magi and the end of their story. After they deliver their presents, they must now face the consequences of what they have unknowingly set in motion. Do they go back to Herod... back to the assumptions that first led them to Jerusalem with their limited wisdom? Sure there is a dream to guide them too, just like with Joseph... but is it the dream or is it something else that helps the Magi make their final decision? They have delivered their presents, but I wonder what did they themselves receive there in that house in Bethlehem? What epiphany did they have in that place... loaded with the information that a king had been born... but not a king born in a palace to royalty and power... a king born to a young girl and her carpenter husband. Perhaps they saw through Herod. It was no secret how he was... prone to violence and political villainy. It could be that they saw him for what he was and so had no problem disobeying his command to return once the child was found. That is all very reasonable... but... Matthew gives us that one line in his story... what might be just a throwaway and simple turn of phrase... but in light of everything could mean so much more... "they left for their own country by another road." They took a different road home. The literal meaning of course is there. But I like the metaphorical meaning behind that sentence. They had changed. They weren't going back the same. The Magi were a little wiser for their travels.

As we leave the Christmas season behind... and the decorations come down and are packed away for another year... what was your epiphany this year? What new insight did you

have as you met the child in the manger... or made it to a home in Bethlehem? What new road are you taking home? What are the consequences of Christmas? Amen.