

Go and Search

A sermon preached by

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Epiphany Sunday 2017

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not

If you Google “The Death of Truth” you can come across scores of articles about the moments in time or history when the author believes that the value or importance of truth died. Not too surprising is the fact that the ones which float to the top this week are about the most recent Presidential election. But if you scroll down the page a little more, you can see a whole host of other times and places where the truth took a holiday. Winston Churchill once said, “Truth is the most valuable thing in the world, so valuable it is often protected by a bodyguard of lies.”

I’m not advocating creative license when it comes to matters of conscience, ethics, governance, or authority. But if we are surprised or believe that it is unprecedented that people in authority don’t tell the truth, then I would submit that we haven’t been reading our history very well. In fact, the scriptures are filled with villains, heroes, and heroines who have lied for one reason or another. The best known and best loved of our Judeo-Christian clan have been known to bury the truth.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, the villain, Herod, adds his two cents to a change purse filled with lies. He says to the Magi, "*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.*" The palace elite must have been snickering in the background when they heard their boss say these words. Because if you read forward in the story, you find out this isn't at all why Herod wants to find the child. His intent is to eliminate anyone who is a potential threat to his authority. And when the Magi don't return to him, he takes out his anger on the families of Bethlehem, when the male children of their region two years old or younger are killed by Roman soldiers, in an effort to eradicate the risk.

So, in Matthew's story the truth that Jesus is the Son of God comes not just to the Jewish people but to all people. And this truth is symbolized through the arrival of these strange and mysterious characters, the magi. Many of us know them as Kings through poems and lyrics. But the interpretive reality is that the magi, who are said to come from the "East," give the unmistakable message that this birth isn't only of importance to the small religious sect known as the people Israel. Instead this Epiphany is a universal realization given to a very isolated and unremarkable people, if they were to be compared historically to the Roman empire.

Ancient magi were persons reputed to be adept at astronomy as well as various occult arts, such as astrology, interpretation of dreams, fortune telling, and magic. Here they are clearly thought of as astronomers or astrologers, who have found the rising of a star to be of world-historical significance. It was a common idea in antiquity that the birth or death of great persons was accompanied by heavenly signs.

Yet here is the paradox. In the search for eternal, universal truth, the church over the centuries has used some of the most historically dubious stories to make this point. The narratives of Jesus' birth, including the story today, were not written until decades after Jesus' death and resurrection. The times and places don't match up with other historical sources of the time. There is a whole semester course on how Christmas didn't come to be celebrated by the church until sometime in the 4th century. And when the children aren't around, ask me about the derivation of Christmas caroling.

So these stories were told, not because there was a Great Aunt recording every moment in a baby book at Jesus' birth. They were told because they contained overarching, mythic, universal truths that pointed toward the reality of how the early Church came to believe who

Jesus was. And they underscored his mission and message for a world that continued to – and still does -- long for a savior. I love these stories and I believe the reason they have captured our imaginations is that they have captured a truth that isn't dependent upon the details of the story as we know them, but instead they bring us a truth that reaches beyond the boundaries of Bethlehem or Nazareth or Jerusalem.

There is more than meets the eye in the identification of these magi as from the "East." The word used for the "East" in the story means "the rising," that is, the rising of the sun. The rising of the sun in the East readily suggests the imagery of light, which is often associated with salvation in the Bible. Isaiah's vision of salvation includes a pilgrimage of the nations that will come to Israel's light to worship the God of Israel. The magi are enacting the fulfillment of this prophecy.

The Old Testament speaks of a star that will rise out of Jacob. This verse was interpreted messianically in Judaism, and it is easy to see how a star could become a symbol for the Messiah. The star of Bethlehem is understood against the background of that text. The star indicates that the Messiah has arrived. It appears again frequently in the Gospels when we hear of a light shining on those who dwell in darkness.

So, the truth of the story is given credibility and support by the Old Testament texts that pointed toward the coming of light, of the Messiah, and of salvation. While Matthew's gospel ends with the risen Jesus' command to the disciples to go out from Galilee to make disciples of all nations, it begins with an anticipatory visit of the Gentiles to Judea to worship the newborn Messiah. The magi stand for all the nations, including us, who would come to worship Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, and see the manifestation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus.

Perhaps in the end, the part of the story that has the most meaning for us today is the command from Herod himself, "Go and search diligently for the child." That is still our task today. To seek, find, and support the places where God is intervening in the world. To seek and find the incarnation surrounded by poverty, instability, and oppression. To seek and find meaning, not just in our community or in our clan, but among those who have a universal longing for peace, for justice, and for hope. To seek and find the truth, not in the narrow confines of our own limited understanding, but in the broad, inviting arch of God's never failing love. And the gifts that we will bring, will be to follow the commandments of the one whom we seek and find. AMEN