Fear Doesn't Stop Us

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Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSVUE)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came
to Jerusalem, **2** asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed
his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was
frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of
the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They 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.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had
appeared. **8** 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." **9** When
they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in
the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had
stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** 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. **12** And having been warned in a
dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, a day we celebrate the light that led the magi to the child Jesus. An epiphany is a sudden, profound realization or a moment of clarity that opens one to a new understanding. On this day, we seek an epiphany of our own – a deeper communion with the living God through the stories of scripture.

There are at least three versions of this story in our collective awareness. The one most familiar to us is the one that is part of the Christmas Eve tableau, the basis for the royal figures found in most nativity scenes, the inspiration behind the songs "We Three Kings" and "The First Noel," among others. In that version, three wise men or kings travel from distant lands, guided only by a star, to find the baby Jesus. When they arrive, they kneel beside shepherds and barnyard animals, presenting gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The source for that story is the Gospel of Matthew, who tells a very different version than the one popularized in Christmas lore. Matthew tells us that "magi came from the east." The word "magi" refers to Zoroastrian astrologers who studied the night skies for guidance and signs of change. The reference to the east suggests that they came from Persia – modern day Iran – traveling more than 1,200 miles. Matthew does not tell us how many magi there were, only that there were three *gifts*. We also do not know if they were all men or if there were some women in their company, since magi were both male and female. Matthew doesn't say they were there immediately after Jesus was born. In fact, based on Herod's reported response, it could have been up to *two years* after Jesus's birth. It is only our well-intentioned but misguided efforts to harmonize the accounts of Matthew and Luke that puts the magi and the shepherds there at the

same time. On the way, the magi encounter Herod, who asks them to report back once they have found the child. But, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another route.

A third version is what we can glean from historical records. Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, which would put Jesus's birth sometime before that. Luke refers to Herod in his first chapter, but places the birth of Jesus during the census of Quirinius, which happened in 6 CE. It is more likely that Jesus was born during the reign of Archelaus sometime between 4 BCE and 6 CE, though we cannot say for certain. Writings of historians like Josephus and Philo both support that timeline, though there are very few other details about Jesus's birth or childhood. The other two canonical gospels contain no details whatsoever about his birth or early life.

It is important to understand that Matthew didn't write his gospel as a historical account of Jesus's life. But he wasn't trying to deceive us, either. It was common practice at the time to shift some of the historical details in order to make a theological point or strengthen a cultural legacy. The writer of Matthew was simply following that practice in order to impart a meaning more significant than simple historical record.

What might Matthew have been trying to tell us? Archelaus may have ruled Judea, but Herod was better known and more infamous. He was an archetype for the kind of ruthless power that Jesus faced as he entered the world. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were gifts often presented to royalty. They were not allegorical representations of Jesus's later life as some interpreters have suggested. Matthew wants us to know that the magi recognized Jesus as a king. Most importantly, Matthew's gospel sets out to present Jesus as one like Moses who would lead God's people to freedom and a new life. In the verses that follow, Matthew will describe Herod's rage, his ordering the slaughter of children under two in Bethlehem, and the holy family fleeing to Egypt. These details echo Moses's early life, though neither an infanticide nor an Egyptian sojourn can be substantiated through historical records.

We could spend a lot of time analyzing and comparing historical accounts to try to reconstruct what really happened (and many have). We could dismiss Matthew's story as a folk tale unsupported by facts. We could take the three kings out of our Christmas tableau (and I could start looking for another church). Or we could focus on what Matthew is trying to tell us and why.

Why would the magi have traveled such a great distance to see a child? Even if he was going to become a king, he wasn't *their* king. What difference would his birth make to them? A *little* history might help here. The Persians had been conquered by Alexander the Great a few centuries earlier. He had imposed many western norms on the people, suppressing Persian culture. The Judeans had also been subjugated by Greeks, though a brief period of self-rule had allowed them to recapture much of their cultural identity. Though they were now part of the Roman Empire, a new king might signal a restoration of their culture and spark a climate of reform across the Middle East. The birth of Jesus may have been a symbol of hope for them, too. *When we are afraid, we need to be able to see beyond our present circumstances.*

Matthew tells us that, on their way to Bethlehem, the magi visited Jerusalem and encountered Herod. If they expected the people to rejoice at the birth of a king, those expectations were quickly dispelled. Matthew says that "(Herod) was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." He summoned the magi, mustered his forces, and hatched a plot to eliminate this new rival to his throne. Fear dictated his response. When despots see a chance to eliminate an adversary or advance their interests, their will is not slowed by law, morality,

or even basic human decency. *Those who resort to violence to achieve power will use violence to retain it, no matter the cost.*

For Matthew, all these events are divinely governed. The magi saw a star that signaled Jesus's birth. While it may have been an astrological sign to them, Matthew wants us to see it as evidence of God's presence at work – a presence that crosses boundaries, a light for *all* people. The light they followed led them to Bethlehem. A dream, not unlike the one Joseph had a chapter earlier, warned them not to go back to Jerusalem, so they went home by another way. Herod was thwarted, at least for now. Providence guided them the whole way. New Testament theologian Boyung Lee writes, "While religious elites remain static, while political leaders tremble and plot, the magi cross boundaries, bow in humility, and respond to revelation. They do what Herod and his allies refuse to do: seek, kneel, and listen."[1] God's love is not limited to those who share our language, our customs, or our understanding of God. *God is God for <u>all</u> people. And God will always make a way.*

What do you fear? How do those fears hold you back or keep you down? Make no mistake – God is still at work, making a way out of no way, pointing the way toward hope and a brighter future. God invites us to join on that journey.

An epiphany is a sudden, profound realization or a moment of clarity that opens us to a new understanding. On this Epiphany Sunday, may we discover this truth: *God's love cannot be stopped* – not by differences of language or custom, not by borders, not by plotting tyrants, and certainly not by fear. As long as we keep our hopes centered on God, fear cannot stop us, either. Amen.

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