

Sermon – “Coming from Afar”
Scripture Reading – Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2016
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The Revised Common Lectionary reading order always is a little funny at Christmastime. The feast of Epiphany takes place nearly two weeks after Christmas, which means there is always at least one Sunday in between the two. There are few stories of Jesus as a baby or child. In fact, there is only one story in the entire Bible that happens in between the birth story and the arrival of the wise men, and that story comes around in the lectionary cycle only once every three years. So two out of every three years, we wind up going a little bit forward in time from the birth of Christ, such as last week’s reading of Jesus left in the temple at age 12, and then jumping back in time again to get to the Epiphany reading that we are about to hear. Listen now for the Word of God in this passage from Matthew, Chapter 2, verses 1 through 12.

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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 at its rising, 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 wise men 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 at its rising, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: “Coming from Afar”

The text: “When they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.” Matthew 2:10

It seems that two primary elements run through this story of the visit of the wise men: mystery, and fear. Mystery appears immediately. Appearing in the city of Jerusalem are strange men from the East, “magi”, recognized as learned astronomers who knew how to interpret signs in the heavens. They speak of one such sign indicating a child born as king of the Jews and have come from afar searching for him. Fear follows right after, for Herod’s reaction is to be frightened, and the people with him.

It may or may not be apparent why this would be so. Remember, however, that this is mysterious, unexpected, and startling news to a king who knew nothing of a royal birth. Herod the Great, a lifelong seeker of power, was someone described by the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia* as a man who “was prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition.”¹ He had murdered and accused and connived his way to the power he wielded, and he kept his grip firmly on it, no matter how many family members had to die in the process. He purposely kept it complicated and unclear who would succeed him as part of his game, and probably to make any would-be assassins think twice. Even the Emperor was reported to have said that it would be better to be Herod’s swine than to be his son.

Even for a less power-hungry king, but especially for such a man as that, news of someone unknown to him being described as “king of the Jews”, someone he couldn’t identify or find and therefore had no power over would be troubling. This question of the magi would surely have been heard by him as “Where is the child who will supplant Herod?” and the wise men going around asking it in public could only have been seen as a worrying development. Public rumors of a new king cannot be but frightening to the old king. And if you live in a city that has had to witness several decades of violence enacted by the old king in his clinging to the throne, then when the king is frightened, you are frightened, too.

Herod apparently does not want it to be known that he is frightened or takes the rumors seriously in any way, for it is in secret that he sends for the wise men to ask them questions, but he has already clearly resolved himself to take action to end any threat before it gets started.

The event may not quite so immediately inspire fear in us, but the appearance of the magi is no less mysterious. In our minds, we have so much detail filled in around their story that we forget the degree of mystery here, so let us consider what we actually know about them, and how much we do not. This short passage from Matthew is the only record we have of them, and all we know of them. It tells us surprisingly little.

Where are they from? “The East.” Who are they? It does not say. We don’t have names or places of origin, nor their positions. Tradition has them possibly being kings, perhaps coming out of attempts to tie them to parts of the Psalms which speak of kings bowing down before the Messiah, but Matthew does not say a word about them being or not being royal, only that they are magi, people already mysterious by their ability to access knowledge beyond what normal people can see and by their foreign origins.

How many of them were there? Our nativity sets and our Christmas hymns picture three, but really we’re only told of three different gifts, and we don’t know how many wise men brought them. Some early Christian traditions had there being three, and others twelve. Both Eastern and Western strands of the church have given them various names at times, but in the scripture they remain unnamed.

What did they see? Hard to say. Plenty of people, intrigued by the star and looking to match it with the historical record, have spent time poring over astronomical calculations and historical writings, searching for planetary conjunctions, or comets, or supernovae, which might have been seen in the

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7598-herod-i>

sky at the time of Jesus's birth. And perhaps it was one of these things, but the text itself is, if you're paying attention, a little odd on that count. The Gospel writer doesn't even announce to us that a star appeared, much less describe it; Matthew first mentions the star only in passing, in the wise men's explanation of why they have come, and doesn't particularly mention that anyone but the wise men ever saw it at all. Herod doesn't ask his own people when the star appeared, which he surely could have done if it were a widely noticed celestial phenomenon. Rather, he has to summon the magi to ask that question, and since they are sent on their way by themselves to seek out the child, it also doesn't seem that anyone else is capable of "following" it. It is possible that this is some kind of heavenly sign that nobody but these foreign astrologers observed at all.

When did this happen? Well, despite the wise men showing up in many nativity scenes and every Christmas pageant ever performed, it almost certainly wasn't the night of Jesus's birth. The actual feast day of Epiphany when we celebrate the revelation of God the Son by remembering the arrival and testimony of the Magi, is January 6, the day after the twelve days of Christmas conclude, but their real arrival was surely far later.

We saw that the wise men were warned in a dream and returned by another route instead of going back to Herod, and we might remember from reading this story on some other occasion that a few verses later, Herod eventually realizes he's been tricked and orders the killing of all the children around Bethlehem under age two, based on the date the magi told him the star appeared.² This tells us that the date they had given him was quite some time earlier. Not to mention that if they came from someplace far off in the East, set out when the star appeared, and the star appeared at his birth, then the time from his birth to their arrival was surely measured in months, not hours or days. So all we can really say is that they showed up sometime in the first two years.

Where did they show up? We don't even know that. It just says, "the place where the child was," and says they went into "the house". It apparently wasn't still a stable, which isn't surprising if it happened months later. It does still seem to be in Bethlehem, at least, although it doesn't even explicitly tell us that.

So we have an unknown number of mysterious men of secret knowledge, from untold places beyond the kingdom where they appeared, following a celestial sign that only they can interpret, bearing expensive gifts of uncertain meaning, coming at some early but unspecified time in the life of Jesus to pay him homage as king. No question that this event is an enigma, and it only gets more intriguing when we pay attention to some of the details.

Why, for instance, did they stop in Jerusalem and start asking around about where to find the newborn king? After all, they had the star as a guide to find the child. It had guided them that far, and the star clearly shows them at the end that they have arrived. Did they just assume asking around in the capital of the region was an easy shortcut to finding him, since everyone there would surely know of the birth of a new royal heir?

And what do these three gifts mean? Even this, while much theorized about, is really only educated guesswork. Some theories hold that these were typical gifts given to kings. Some that they each had spiritual meaning foreshadowing an element of Christ's identity; gold signifying his royalty,

² See Matthew 2:12-18.

myrrh, an embalming ointment, signifying his coming death, and frankincense, an incense, signifying his nature as God. Some traditions hold that these gifts were practical, for instance, the gold used in the holy family's escape to Egypt and the myrrh used on his own body after he was crucified.

We also know nothing about these men after they went on their way. "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." That is the last we ever hear of them. "Their own country" is all we're ever given about where they are from or where they have gone. They are left completely mysterious, somewhat reminiscent of a few of the mysterious characters encountered in the Old Testament, such as Balaam, or Melchizedek, outsiders who have some connection to knowledge of God that is left unexplained.

There's a more central mystery here, too: why did they come at all? Why do these apparent foreigners care about the birth of a new king of the Jews? The Jews were just one of any number of tiny, regional ethnic groups ruled by the vast Roman Empire. Surely Jews themselves would care about who succeeded Herod as king, and maybe persons of high rank from the very next country over might have made a state visit to honor the royal family upon the birth of a new heir, but why would visitors who seem to have come from altogether outside the Empire pick up and travel to this little provincial capital to pay homage to this tiny nation's future king?

Perhaps there was something more than just typical kingship in what they read into the heavenly signs. It may have even been hinted at in the questions they asked upon their arrival in Jerusalem. Remember that they came asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Perhaps they mean this literally. Are they asking about the one who has been born as an heir to the throne—the *future* king? Or one who has literally been *born king*, one who is king from birth?

The latter would be even far more troubling to Herod, and if their questions were hinting at that, it is no surprise that he was frightened. Foreign persons—dignitaries? Kings? We're not sure who, and probably neither is Herod—coming to proclaim their alliance and allegiance to another living king inside his realm is a bold and dangerous thing. It not only lifts up the possibility of a competing ruler, who could draw away Herod's own people, it indicates that outside powers may be allied with this newly discovered threat.

Somehow, this mysterious proclamation written in the skies beckoned these men from afar. Even they clearly did not understand fully whom they were being called to, evidenced by their stopping in Jerusalem to ask around the capital city about the new king, as if he were going to be found among the existing ruling class. And yet somehow they understood that whatever this sign was, it called them, even as foreigners, to come from the outside. They saw the birth signified by this star as having worldwide significance, that it was something of major import to the whole human race and not just the Jews, and they were overwhelmed with joy when they finally found him and could offer their gifts, for this was the one to whom they had been called from afar.

And so it seems to be for us: this mystery is an invitation. Herod did not hear invitation in it, because when his first internal reaction was fear, he let this immediate gut reaction govern his response. We, too, live amidst fears that can be stirred up when we hear of something that seems strange and threatening to our comfortable and established way of life. And mystery is hard for us in our age of facts at our fingertips, flowing freely and instantly at every whimsical Internet query. We

don't respect mystery or hear it, or sometimes even notice it, in our continually distracted lives lived in an attention deficit. And even once *noticed*, the voice of mystery is not often *heard* unless we are willing to sit with it for a while, in contemplation, perhaps in the way that Luke describes Mary on more than one occasion as sitting with mysterious, unexpected proclamation and pondering it.³

The wise men encountered a mysterious testimony in the sky above them and in it they heard the words that would later be echoed by the disciple Philip when his friend Nathanael questioned the strange things he was testifying to about this man Jesus: "Come and see," Philip said to him.⁴ And so he did, and so did they. The wise men followed the star where it led, and their own story in turn is a mystery-filled testimony of this child who was not just an earthly king of one small people, but who summoned all the nations to himself.

Come and see. This is what the magi did, and this what we, too, are invited to do. Our lives are varied and have gone in many directions; we, too, are coming from afar, but let us look, and listen, set our fears to the side for a time, and ponder the mystery of our own call; let us, too, "come and see," and may God give us the perseverance and the guidance to follow that journey all the way to its end. Amen.

³ See Luke 1:26-38 and Luke 2:8-20.

⁴ John 1:43-46.