

Epiphany of Our Lord  
First Trinity Lutheran Church  
January 6, 2012  
Matthew 2:1-12

### **Everything Has Changed**

For those you who were here on Christmas Eve you heard me preach a sermon that was not so soft and quiet and peaceful that is portrayed in the many Christmas carols and stories surrounding this celebration, but rather realistic in that we live in a very violent and sinful world that is anything but peaceful. Today we celebrate Epiphany the coming of the Wise Men to see the baby Jesus and there can be two ways to tell the story of the three-kings, one is more like a children's story and the other is a story best suited for adults.

The first version of the story is one that we most likely grew up with. Today in many churches will act out Epiphany plays complete with bathrobes and crowns. This is the story of three kings who came from afar bearing gifts for the newborn king. There's a magic about this story of wondering magi led to Jesus from the East by a star. It testifies to the far-reaching, indeed, global and cosmic, implications of Jesus' birth. Even more, it witnesses to God's commitment to reach the entire world with news of God's redeeming love.

This is a great story in part because of the mystery these distant and exotic guests portray and in part because of the beauty and fittingness of their gifts which is the origin of all our gift-giving at Christmas. The visitors from the East bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world: gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil. The Book of Isaiah, when describing Jerusalem's glorious restoration, tells of nations and kings who will come and "bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord" (Isaiah 60:6)

Today as part of our offering we will bring these gifts up to the altar and the question can be asked what gifts we might bring to Jesus. What talents, interests, and passions might

we see as gifts from God that we now can offer to Jesus by giving them to those all around us and especially to those in need? In the song the Drummer Boy, the boy, who is poor, has no gift to bring but he did have a talent, playing his drum, he played the drum the best for him to song says. No matter who we are we all have something to give.

This is one way to see the Wiseman story but there is also another element to this story that often gets lost in the shuffle and that's the element of fear and opposition that accompanies Jesus' birth right from the beginning. Herod, after all, does not greet the news of a newborn king with joy, nor does he search for a gift fit to present to the child. Rather, he is afraid and not just Herod, but "all Jerusalem with him" says verse 3 of Matthew. Why? Why is this? Perhaps it is because the one thing that the powerful seek more than anything else is to stay in power. Gone from Herod and his court is any notion of the kind of servant leadership prescribed and required by Israel's prophets. Gone is the memory that God placed them in their positions to serve rather than be served. Herod seeks his own ends and so is immediately threatened by even the mere mention of another – and therefore rival – king.

But perhaps it's also that the presence of these magi and their quest for God's messiah announce that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God's messiah. The arrival of these wondering astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is broadening considerably, that there are no longer "insiders" and "outsiders," but that all are included in God's plan for salvation. It seems to be happening that all distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions are dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

Whatever its various and sundry causes, fear is a powerful thing. In response to their fear, Herod, along with the chief priests and scribes, conspire to find the Messiah and kill him. They will not succeed this time, but much later in the story there will again be an unholy

alliance between the political and religious leaders of the day who will not only conspire against Jesus but this time capture and crucify him.

And what about us? What does fear do to us? Do we install more security systems in our homes and cars? Do we build more gates or buy more guns? Do we take more pills to relax us or calm us? Do we save even more for retirement, pulling back from charitable contributions to make sure we have enough? Do we close our hearts – and minds – to those who are different?

Matthew's version of the nativity moves quickly from the glad moment of visiting the child and presenting the gifts to a darker, more ambivalent world of political intrigue, deception, and fear-induced violence. But if Matthew's account is more sober, it is also realistic. We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating super-storms and school massacres, a world where the innocent die every day to preventable illness and hunger. In Matthew's story remember that after the Birth of Jesus Herod was so obsessed with getting rid of this infant Jesus that he had all boys killed in and around Bethlehem who were two years or younger. Matthew renders an accurate if also difficult picture of the world.

And that is what is at the heart of Matthew's darker story of Jesus' birth: to tell us that God comes precisely to this world to people so consumed by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves. God says to us through Jesus that he loves us despite ourselves. That he came to save us from ourselves. Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us. In Jesus we have a living and breathing promise that God has come live and die for us, as we are, so that we might experience newness of life.

Perhaps Matthews sketches his story of Jesus' birth – and our lives – with darker strokes precisely so that we might perceive the glory and grace of God's redemption in Christ

all the more clearly, kind of like a bright star shining high in the heavens and leading us to greet our savior and Lord.

So here we are at the beginning of 2013 invited again to bring any and all of our gifts to the Lord. But even when we don't bring our gifts because of say for example, our fear, or when we hoard or covet or cheat or betray, for God knows who and what we are, yet he still comes to us as, Emmanuel God with us. God loves us today, tomorrow, and into Eternal Life.

Amen