

Sermon for The Feast of the Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7,10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

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Perhaps you have seen this cartoon circulating around Facebook about the Three Wise Men visiting the Holy Family at Epiphany. After they have offered Frankincense, Gold, and Myrrh, they depart, and the cartoon depicts the arrival of the Three Wiser Women, offering diapers, formula, and casseroles for a whole week (<http://www.patheos.com/.../rel.../2015/12/three-wiser-women.html>).

Regardless of gender stereotypes, one of the things I like about this cartoon is how it reminds us of how distant the Wise Men seem to us in modern days. Although we almost always recognize three wise men and our tradition even has names for them - Balthazar, Gaspar (or Caspar), and Melchior – we do not even know how many of them visited the Christ child, let alone their names.

In some places, including a few Episcopal traditions, homes are blessed by writing above your door the year in chalk separated by the initials passed down through legend: “20 + C + M + B + 17.” This bit of paraliturgical ritual, something beyond what we hold to be the core of our faith, is suggestive of how we view these wise men. We see them as offering protection, as advocates on our behalf.

And yet, we do not really know what to do with the wise men, or Epiphany. At least, I have to remind myself every year that Epiphany is more than just that day that follows the end of the twelve days of Christmas. One of the reasons why we planned to hold our annual Pageant here at Hickory Neck on the occasion of Epiphany rather than Christmas is that we usually conflate our stories, imagining that wise men and shepherds all come together at once to see the newborn Jesus. In reality, these two stories are probably separated by a few years.

All in all, this day offers more confusion on the surface than anything else. But Matthew’s Gospel does offer us some important context:

“Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had

appeared. 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.’” (Matthew 2:7-8 NRSV).

If the wise men represent protection to us today, Herod represents all that we need to seek protection from. By historical accounts, Herod was not a ruler to cross; even though the Biblical accounts of Herod’s desire to have Jesus killed and the resulting slaughter of children Jesus’ age may not be completely factual, plenty of independent accounts confirm he was a strict ruler.

These wise men are led to Jesus by order of a harsh, authoritarian ruler who is known to history for his evil deeds. That hardly meshes with our precious Christmas and Epiphany narrative. In the days before cable news and our constant news cycle, these wise men (despite their name!) may simply have been unaware of Herod’s reputation. Although he was known as a King, he was little more than a puppet ruler under the Roman authority – hardly a great narrative in its own right, but not necessarily bad.

And so, here we have these characters we see as protectors, sent to gather information for an oppressive leader for his own gain.

But, there is good news! The Author of Mathew continues: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (Matthew 2:12). By now, we know what it means to receive a message in a dream. Just a few verses before our reading today, Joseph is told in a dream to remain with Mary. Although the story is not phrased quite like this, one could imagine the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary in a dream. The Old Testament is filled with prophetic dreams, from Daniel to Joel to Jacob’s ladder. You might be able to relate, having at times found inspiration in the middle of the night, or at some moment you have allowed your mind to wander. Dreams, in this context, are an assurance of God’s work in the world, through the action of the Holy Spirit.

The good news is this: we are presented with a story on this day that easily could have gone a different way. Had the wise men listened to Herod and returned to him with news of this miraculous child, we might have remained in the dark, having lost the knowledge of our God. Instead, God prevailed, love won out, and through the actions of the wise men we now know of Jesus Christ. The great action was not in following a star or paying homage in frankincense and gold and myrrh, or even in diapers and formula and meals for Jesus' parents, but in listening to the Word of God and allowing God to work in the world.

The blessing this day is not in the protection of three wise men but in God. This does not discount the work of the wise men; their actions took courage to disobey such worldly power. Yet if we seek hope in the form of these figures, of which we know so little, we will not be sustained in the face of our own struggles. Forasmuch as we might need it, I would not recommend waiting by your door, waiting for wise women and men to show up and provide guidance.

The work continues in this age. This time a year ago, I was preparing to travel to South Africa to study the life of and to meet Desmond Tutu. Our world is still filled with wise women and men who act on the Word of God, and Archbishop Tutu is one of them. He stood as a strong voice against the Apartheid movement in South Africa in support of a new government led by the African National Congress, the ANC. Today, that same ANC faces corruption in a new South Africa that remains racially divided decades after the end of Apartheid.

As a result, Archbishop Tutu has spoken out: "I really am warning you out of love. ... One day, we will start praying for the defeat of the ANC Government. ... You are behaving in a way that is totally at variance with the things for which we stood" (<http://www.biznews.com/.../desmond-tutu-goes-360-jacob-zuma-.../>).

The good news of this day continues. Not only does God provide protection, but God works through both good and evil. God alone is above such things, and God alone consistently sees the goodness in God's creation. God used the oppressive society overseen by Roman imperial power as the conduit to shine a great light into the world, a light that still shines today. God used the horrors of South African apartheid to lift up a voice from among the voiceless to be a blessing not only for his people but for the whole world. And while it does not

take an atrocity of such world proportions for God to act, such terrors are not beyond God's ability to respond.

Oppression does not mean that God is silent; the opposite is true. We are brought back to that occasion so many years ago, following that star to meet again and again the Holy Child who is to lead us all as a light, even in the darkest day. For that, thanks be to God. Amen.