

“The Two Stories”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 8, 2016
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I love the story of the three kings. Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, saw a new star shining in the night sky. Being astrologers and astronomers, they not only knew that this was a new star in the heavens, but they knew that it was in the constellation that had to do with the Jewish nation and a new star could only mean that a new king had been born to rule over the Jews. So they packed up their treasures and set out for Jerusalem. They saddled their camels and horses for the great trek across the desert and then they traveled for many months before reaching Jerusalem. When they met with Herod, they found an old, paranoid king who slyly told them that a new Jewish king was supposed to come from Bethlehem, the city of David, and if they found one, they should let him know. So they traveled the few miles down the road to Bethlehem and the star led them to the stable behind the inn where Mary and Joseph still had the baby. Recognizing him as the new king, they knelt down and placed their gifts at the side of the manger and then went and found themselves a room in Bethlehem.

I love that story because it tells us about the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas time, it also has the heavens themselves as well as representatives of all humanity bowing down at the manger to worship Jesus. And as the hymn “We Three Kings” shows us, there is meaning behind each one of the gifts: the gold is the traditional present for a king, the frankincense is incense that is used in worship and so is the symbol for a priest, and the myrrh is a healing balm that is used for wounds but also to prepare a body for burial. King and Priest and Sacrifice, Christ is all for us and the wise men recognized all of that. For those reasons, in many cultures it is Epiphany or Three Kings Day that is celebrated with the giving of gifts and feasting. In some cultures children line a shoebox with grass, place it at the end of their beds and in the morning the grass is gone and gifts have replaced it. Unlike our culture which leaves milk and cookies for Santa and the occasional carrot for the reindeer, the grass is left to feed the camels of the wise men when they come to leave their gifts.

I love this story because it tells us that as Christ is God's gift to us, so we give gifts to the Child Christ in response to God's grace. And we might not give precious gifts like gold, but even our songs like the Little Drummer Boy and the one we will sing soon "In the Bleak Midwinter" say that each of us, poor as we are, can give something. It's a wonderful story. Full of the light of the star and the worship of the kings and the faith of Mary and Joseph, a happy story, through and through. Or is it?

Most of you know by this point that many of our assumptions about this story are exactly that, assumptions. They weren't kings, were they? No, the scripture says they were "magi." We think that means they were wise men or astrologers from the East. Do we know where? No, but most likely is that they were from Persia, modern Iran. What's important is that they weren't Jews, they were Gentiles, signifying that Christ came for the whole world, and also that they came to worship. Do we know their names were Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar? No, the scripture never says and it never even tells us that there were three of them. It doesn't say how many, it just names three gifts that were presented. Gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts that signify kingship and divinity and sacrifice, right? Well . . . actually each of those gifts were equally precious and could be a gift appropriate for a king and Matthew never really gives meaning to the gifts, he just says they were presented. And not at the side of the manger either, if you listened carefully, the story Matthew tells says they went to the house where the holy family was and worshiped him there. Matthew doesn't have anything to say about a manger or shepherds or an angelic choir. In fact Matthew's story is a little more scary than Luke's story. Epiphany, at least as Matthew tells it, is not full of sweetness and light.

In the ancient Abbey Church on the island of Iona in Scotland is a little side stairway called the night stair. This is the stairway that the monks would use in the night when they came down for their prayers at 3 am and that they would use again to return to their beds. It is still used today for Abbey members who meet late to pray and then go up the night stairs to bed. But as they go up that stair at the turn of the stairs going up to the chapter house is a carving, a picture of the three wise men asleep in one bed. But next to the bed is an angel, complete with wings and halo. The magi are asleep but the angel is

awake touching their hands and pointing urgently beyond them—warning them in a dream not to return to Herod, and to go home a different way.

What happens when they wake up? They have completed their journey, delivered their gifts and now they are supposed to go back and tell Herod what they had found. Will they? Or has the dream taught them something different? “Epiphany means a manifestation—a discovery, a showing, bringing into the light of day, seeing plainly. In the helpless child in his mother’s arms, they saw the Messiah: a powerful moment of epiphany. And now this dream shows them something else. It is a little epiphany, a way of seeing that everything is not as it seems: that there is another level of truth, and a different way home.” (Alison Swinfen)

The angel shows them a different way because the world they live in is not easy. It is full of fear, of kings who will try to get rid of innocent children in Bethlehem in order to consolidate their power. It is a world where the holy family ends up as refugees fleeing from their home in fear for their lives. This is the second story of Epiphany, one that we don't like to tell so much. This more adult version of Matthew’s nativity moves quickly from the glad moment of the adoration and gifts of the magi to a darker, more ambivalent world of political intrigue, deception, and fear-induced violence. (There’s a reason we read Luke on Christmas Eve!) 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 airport baggage claim massacres, a world where innocents die everyday to preventable illness and hunger. In Matthew’s story of the visit of the magi – and the subsequent slaughter of the innocents in the verses to come – Matthew renders an accurate if also difficult picture of the world.

And that is what is at the heart of Matthew’s darker, more adult-oriented story of Jesus’ birth: the promise that is precisely *this* world that God came to, *this* people so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves that God loves, *this* gaping need that we have and bear that God remedies. Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us, the living, breathing, and vulnerable promise that God chose to come live and die for us, as we are, so that in Christ’s resurrection we, too might experience

newness of life.¹

It is this second story that we need to hear, because it is our story. It is our world, our lives that are so often full of fear. We are afraid of the future, of one another, of listening to the news at night. And it is this world that the Christ child comes into. It is here that the angels tap us on the shoulder and say “Fear not.”

As Denise Levertov writes in her poem “[On the Mystery of the Incarnation](#)”:

*It's when we face for a moment
the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
the taint in our own selves, that awe
cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart.*

I think Matthew would agree. Indeed, 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.²

Sometime it is in the darkness of our times that we are most able to see his light shine.

1 Lose, David. *Adults Only Nativity Story*. WorkingPreacher.org. Dec. 30, 2012.

2 Lose, David. “”