

Epiphany of Our Lord
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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Today's gospel reading is complex. At the surface, we heard that multiple magi brought three gifts from afar to honor Jesus. If we look at the context, we find that these magi were probably educated, foreign, astrologists who were religious leaders in Zoroastrianism¹ and came from present-day countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India. The magi had political ties to Jerusalem's enemy,² and they came to illegally influence another country's leadership by providing information and finances (you know, gold, frankincense, and myrrh) so that the Holy Family could seek asylum in Egypt. This led to Herod's decision to commit infanticide when he was fooled by the magi.³ And no, this wasn't a movie I watched last night or a news article I read this morning; instead, it was today's gospel reading. And, if we look just a wee-bit deeper at Herod and the scribes, we will find a few more details that make today's gospel even more complex.

In today's reading, we heard that King Herod and all of Jerusalem were afraid at what the magi revealed. Now, the thing about Herod is that he was a puppet king beholden to Rome. Historically speaking, he was a decent ruler, but he was ruthless in keeping his power. He was a paranoid, narcissist who was obsessed with his reputation.⁴ For example, an ancient historian said that Herod was so concerned that no one would

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4305

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3931

³ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/12/the-child-king-messiah-shepherd-child.html>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

mourn his death, that he ordered a large group of well-respected men to be killed when he died so that an appropriate display of grief would occur.⁵ But, here's the thing about today's story with Jesus, the magi, gifts, and infanticide, many historians and biblical scholars believe that it is not historically accurate. However, this story is a true representation of Herod's character.⁶ For, Herod would (and did) kill anyone, of any age, in any manner to hold onto his power.

Likewise, this story is a true representation of what happens all the time. Some leaders—whether in government, corporations, schools, and, even, churches—will do whatever they can to keep power and preserve their reputation. It's calling in a “favor” to keep truth silenced, and there, we see Herod. It's intentionally fudging some numbers to make things look better, and there, we see Herod. It's making up a little white lie to impress someone, and there, we see Herod. Sure, you and I, we might not physically kill children or assassinate an enemy, but we do intentionally and unintentionally support policies that stunt the success of all children and that assassinate another's character just for a little ego boost or a few extra dollars in our bank account. You see, the story may not be based on historical facts, but the truth that it communicates happens all the time.

And, there are more truths to be found in today's reading. They don't come from angels, kings, or magi; instead, the truths come from the religious scribes. Those experts who, with all of Jerusalem, were terrified with Herod. Terrified because they knew that if their narcissistic and cruel leader was terrified then anything could happen. Terrified because if Herod felt threatened, heads were going to roll. So, the

⁵ Josephus, Antiquities, 17.6.174–175.

⁶ Using ideas on truth from <https://reluctantxtian.com/2020/01/04/why-i-dont-think-the-magi-actually-happened-but-still-believe-its-true/>

religious experts revealed the truth in the Hebrew Scriptures from the prophet Micah. And, Herod received the information about Bethlehem, but, he missed the underlying truth. So, when the magi did not return, Herod did what Herod does best: he killed, silenced, and obliterated another out of his own fear and insecurity. But, the truth was not found in a geographic location.

You see, the prophet Micah's message was built on truth. Micah had experienced the ways that overbearing policies of the political, social, and religious leaders impacted the most vulnerable. For, Micah is a prophet of the people who exposed injustice and inequity, he offered a word of hope and salvation, and he made known God's vision of a new and transformed way of life for his community and the world.⁷ After all, the truth shared with Herod was not a location, but rather, it was the truth about God's vision. And, this vision for me, you, us, and all of creation is not something that can be killed. God's vision crosses borders, religions, and socio-economic classes. God's vision is carried by Zoroastrian priests and by a family seeking asylum. God's vision is carried by Jewish religious experts and by astronomical wisdom. You see, God's vision permeates Micah's world in eighth-century BCE, first-century Jerusalem, and twenty-first century Chicago.

God's vision is what we will study in Matthew's gospel in the months ahead. It's a vision that roots itself deeply in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's a vision that recognizes that true leadership is defined by serving. It's a vision where relationality and forgiveness are the primary currency. It's a vision where evil is confronted through non-violent resistance. And, it's a vision where true wealth comes from sharing our gifts with all the world.

⁷ *Harper Collins Study Bible*. "Introduction to the book of Micah."

You see, Matthew's gospel will force us to confront some uncomfortable things about ourselves and our world. We're forced to see that God's message lived on in Jesus who was an asylum-seeker fearing for his life. And, with that knowledge, we are encouraged to support the 25 people who are forced to flee their homes every single minute (that's almost 2,000 displaced persons during today's service alone).⁸ So too, Matthew will force us to analyze the ways we use our voice and our votes to support or oppose the use of power. We'll ponder if our elected leaders are finding pathways of forgiveness and non-violence. We'll explore if our church leaders find honor in serving. We'll ask if the rich have discovered true wealth in sharing it with others. We'll discern if those who have power and privilege are using it to care for all creation. These tasks are the meat on Matthew's syllabus for this year's study.

And, at the same time, Matthew will remind us that God's love for us and all creation never changes. We see it in Micah, we see it in Matthew, and we see it here. For, as we gather the gifts of the Advent Project (and, pie Dr. Jordan in the face), we acknowledge those who hunger for food, and together, we hunger for God's justice. As we send money to feed food insecure theology students, as we cloth our neighbors at Trinidad Lutheran Church, and as we support displaced people in partnership with ELCA World Hunger, we reflect God's love.

So, friends, we have a lot to do together, so I'm going to leave us here. I pray that you've gained a renewed understanding of the complexity of Matthew's gospel. I hope you've found the depth of God's loving presence in millennia of humanity's experiences. And, I pray that we can experience God's truth born each day with you and with me. Amen.

⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>