

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Rev. Jason S. Glombicki

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On this last Sunday of the Christmas season, I'm thinking back to Christmas Eve. On that night, we first gathered for a children's service and told Luke's Christmas story. Every year as we share that story, a child will want to put the shepherds and the magi together at Jesus' birth. And I understand why. After all, many of our devotional manger scenes do show everyone there all at once. However, Biblically-speaking, it's a conflation of two different stories of Jesus' early life.

You see, that familiar Christmas Eve story from Luke's gospel had a manger but there were no magi around. But today, we're in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew's gospel, there was no manger, no shepherds, no family gathered for a census, no journey while pregnant, and no occupied guest room. Instead, we found Mary and Joseph living in Bethlehem where magi from the East visited them likely days, if not weeks, after Jesus' birth.

Yet, on this final Sunday of the Christmas season, we're not here to debate if Luke or Matthew was more historically accurate or if both can go together chronologically. Rather, today, we're here to emphasize the truths revealed in Matthew's story.

And, the truth of the matter is, we don't know how many magi there were. There could have been two, twenty, or twenty-two thousand. What the text does say is that they brought three gifts. It's also clear that the magi saw an

astrological event, and they knew it was significant. These magi were likely Zoroastrian priests who were skilled in interpreting dreams and astrology. Their primary prophet is Zoroaster who was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin, which sounds kind of familiar. Unlike Jesus, Zoroaster predicted that “other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets.” Thus, Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell these births by reading the stars. Like the Judeans, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of a savior.¹ So, it’s not out of the ordinary for these magi to be gazing at the sky looking for a celestial sign.

And when they saw the cosmic sign, they were curious and hopeful. So, they followed the star and journeyed to the logical place for a new Judean king to be born, that is Jerusalem. There, they discovered that the newly born king was not with or related to the reigning king. And, it was after they asked King Herod for directions that things got dicey.

Now, Herod the Great had a reputation of being a bloodthirsty ruler known for committing any crime in pursuit of his unbounded ambition. So, while it might not be historically accurate, it is characteristic of his rule to give a decree to slaughter innocent children so as to eliminate this new “King of the Judeans” as mentioned later in Matthew.

In today’s story, we have an interesting juxtaposition of two responses to a new cosmic event. The magi saw something in the heavens and sought to further explore and support that which would bring about justice and life. On the other hand, Herod sought to destroy, deceive, and derail anything that did not support *his* ambition and ideas. These varied responses to God’s

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3931

gifts are what Matthew will explore throughout the gospel. What we will find is that, whether we like it or not, God's love, God's presence, and God's fullness are here in this world and throughout the entire cosmos. Hard stop. Now knowing that we don't have to do a darn thing to receive God's love, grace, and acceptance, then we are free to wonder how we might respond. Will we respond with hardness of heart and selfish motivations, like Herod, or will we journey like the magi to seek and share love across borders, boundaries, and into the unknown?

And, this question applies not only to our personal lives but also to our communal life here in this place. // For years now, we've been discussing how we might better welcome refugees fleeing the oppressive forces in the world. In 2017, we officially adopted our status of becoming an Immigrant Welcoming Congregation, and we re-affirmed that commitment in 2021 when we became an AMMPARO Welcoming Congregation. For some time, this meant financially supporting the work of organizations like Illinois Community for Displaced Immigrants (ICDI for short) and Refugee One. Yet, late last year, this important, yet fairly passive action, birthed something new as we glimpsed a star being born. You see, our congregation came together with a desire to co-sponsor a refugee family and to provide a haven for those fleeing oppression. Together, we sought to act like those magi helping to give gold to fund the escape of the Holy Family and to act like the Egyptians who gave protected the Holy Family from the unhinged Herod. And throughout the Advent Project, we've been raising the funds that go with these volunteers. Soon, we will see the star stop over a particular family. We will rejoice with the new life granted to them and we will share our gifts of relationship and support.

And I see God's leading star throughout our community in other ways too. For we have seen the glimpse of a God's star continue to lead us toward making this building A.D.A. accessible. And over the next year, we'll watch as the star gets closer before it stands still as we offer our gifts to create a space that welcomes all abilities and gender identities. You see, we, like the magi, have seen God's star leading us in so many ways and have been invited to follow and join in God's love.

And that is what Epiphany is all about. God's presence is among us - sometimes glimpsed as a shooting star, sustained bright as the north star, or ever close like our beloved sun. For God's presence is found in the cosmos *and* in the place we call home. God's love is given for us without condition. And with that gift, we are offered the opportunity notice God's new stars birthed among us, to seek these glimpses with awe and wonder, and to share God's gift near and far. Let us give thanks for the magi's witness and strive to share God's love across borders and barriers each day. Amen.