

Matthew 2:1-12
Feast of the Epiphany
St. Mary the Virgin
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January 6, 2022

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
 who is to shepherd my people Israel."

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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Feast of the Epiphany has long been special to me. So, before I work on the Gospel text a few words on why it is special to me. This is the first sermon I've preached in a church on the Feast of the Epiphany since at least 1987.

In September 1973 I matriculated at Virginia Seminary. Had you asked me I would've told you that I was a Christian but in reality I was an Episcopalian with little to no idea what it meant to be a Christian. I'd grown up in a small Anglo-Catholic church in South Jersey. It was a peculiar form of Anglo-Catholicism since its liturgy was inspired by graduates of the Philadelphia Divinity School. In hindsight it is obvious that it was an idiosyncratic form of Anglo-Catholicism. We got some things right but PDS graduates were notorious, I discovered many years later, for learning how to crack the priest's host at the fraction so that it was audible to the congregation. The overriding message was that I learned how really special it was to be an Episcopalian rather than either a Protestant or Catholic. I didn't learn much about Christianity. The church was important to me and I worshiped weekly all through college and my career with Procter & Gamble so going to seminary didn't seem a big step. I entered a confident Episcopalian and clueless Christian.

On December 18, 1976 I was made a priest in a small church in Murray Hill, NJ. I had learned lots of Christian words but not sure I was really Christian. I was proud to be a priest in the Episcopal Church and I was convinced, I see upon reflection, that my ordination would change me to be the instrument necessary to bring in the true faith

(whatever that is). After all I was a Ph.D. student at Princeton Seminary. I'd done well at Virginia Seminary. I was unique.

Then I celebrated the Eucharist as a priest for the first time on December 19 expecting it to be a moment when I would feel especially close to God since I now had magic in my fingers. The only thing I felt was nervous about forgetting something and making a mistake. I felt no existential change. I was the same as I had been on December 17, or June 13 when I was ordained a deacon, or any other point in my life. I had not become a different person. I was a man. I was disappointed.

It soon became apparent that I was doing more than I could do. I was a fulltime student in Old Testament. I was a Teaching Fellow and Instructor of Hebrew. I was half-time curate in this small eccentric parish and I was a husband and father. My body reacted negatively to the stress and I was diagnosed with Mononucleosis at age 29. In February 1977 I spoke to the Rector and told him that I couldn't do it all. I needed to simplify my life and therefore I was resigning immediately. He didn't take it well. He told me that if I abandoned him I'd never work in the church again. I believed him and I continued at the church until June. I took steroids for the mono and continued to work but the priesthood not only didn't change me, I was depressed and unhappy.

When my contract ended, after months of working in a difficult situation, I looked for another parish to join. I found All Saints, Princeton, the other church in Princeton¹. I was not interested in becoming a curate. They had no money to afford one in any event. I told the Rector, Orley Swartzentruber, that I was willing to function as a deacon but I was burnt-out after 6 months as a priest. I promised to let him know when I felt ready to function as a priest again. I was content to serve as a deacon.

Orley showed me what it means to be a priest, and a Christian². He was patient, kind and he mentored me. Our politics and approach to the bible could not have been more different. He was conservative in all things. I am not. Nevertheless we worked together well and I told him after Christmas that I was ready to function as a priest. I felt like I'd had a diaconate now and learned something, so we agreed that my first Mass would be Epiphany 1978. I was beginning to learn what it means to be a Christian. I hope I've continued to learn what it means to be a Christian.

So this gets us to Epiphany. That is the feast when Jesus is revealed to be the Christ for all of creation, even me and you.

Herod is Herod the Great³ who scholars agree died in 4 BCE so we must keep that in mind when we date the birth of Jesus. We have no idea what Herod the Great, or his sons, really thought about Jesus or if they even noticed his existence. The Herods and Pilate are as we receive them entirely the creations of the Evangelists. No one interviewed them and they left no memoir that reflected on Jesus or early Christianity.

Matthew is rewriting what it means to be King, in this he is preparing us for a new understanding of what it means to be Messiah. While Matthew has shown that Jesus is the Son of David he has immediately removed that of meaning by having Joseph

¹ Nassau Presbyterian is really THE church in Princeton, but for Episcopalians Trinity was The Church and All SS the other church.

² He died in June 2019.

³ It is always worth beginning any bible study of the Gospels to google Herod and get the various Herods straight in your mind. Many scholars today do not see Herod the Great as especially evil. He was simply a man of his time using the common tools of a man of his time.

not be his father. Jesus has a credential Herod doesn't have but it signifies less than it might.

Herod and his sons exercised monarchy in a way that was understandable for the time. It was cruel and it was believed to be necessary to use force to retain power over what is depicted as a restless people⁴.

Jesus is shown already in chapter 2 as a different kind of King. He is powerless. Indeed throughout the chapter he has no power. He is a child and events happen to him. He is invariably referred to in the passive. Unlike David⁵, for instance, he is not referred to as possessing beauty or strength. He is dependent and it is clear that his purpose is to bring his people forgiveness of their sins.

Herod is the king, v. 1 but Jesus is the one Born King of the Jews. Matthew is working ironically. We know how this turns out. Herod has all the trappings of power and ultimately it will do him, or his heirs, no good. Jesus will, in Christian terms, triumph. However the understanding of triumph must be redefined and the Gospel seeks to do that. Rome is in power at the beginning and at the end. Jesus never leads a revolt and never seeks that power. He was a different sort of King.

The Epiphany is arguably more important than Christmas to us because it is the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah to the entire world and not simply to God's Chosen People. Jesus is clearly understood by Matthew to be the Messiah for the Jews who will bring God's chosen to Salvation. However they don't understand and ultimately reject, him. Foreigners, without the benefit of Torah or heritage, get him immediately and worship him as King.

Herod the Great was a convert to Judaism so his Jewishness is suspect. There are parallels with the story of Moses in which pharaoh was warned to expect the birth of someone. Herod is the new pharaoh.

What might it mean that our savior came offering his people a salvation they weren't seeking and denying them the political freedom they sought? We have throughout the bible a struggle between our seeking political power and a God who has no interest in it. We have radically redefined the church as a player in the political field and it has consistently corrupted us. Politics and tangible power in the church and in society have always won over the message of the Prince of Peace.

It is of more than passing interest that while the people of Israel don't recognize him, or to the degree they do, fear him, that God has announced that he is his beloved son in 3:17⁶ and 17:15⁷ and this is ignored. Likewise Satan has acknowledged him in the Temptation when he comes out of the desert, 4:3, 6 and again in the actions of the Demonic Spirits, 8:29, the story of the Gerasene demoniac. Jesus reveals that he is the messiah to John the Baptist when he is in prison⁸, 11:2. Ultimately he is crucified. Matthew is a play between political power and deliverance from our separation from God. We consistently choose political power. Nevertheless we are reconciled, or at least

⁴ We know from archeology that Herod and his heirs lived in fear of the people they ruled. Masada was built to save Herod, if he needed it, from his subjects.

⁵ In the story of the Call of David by Samuel. See 1 Sam 16. David is selected precisely because he is the youngest and least likely but then the redactor inserts how strong and handsome he is ruining the point of the call.

⁶ Baptism

⁷ Transfiguration

⁸ Under a different Herod.

have the possibility of being reconciled if according to Matthew we accept that Jesus is Lord and live accordingly.

My journey, to return to my story, began in my little church in Penns Grove, NJ. Perhaps I was exposed to the message but just didn't hear it? I don't know. Certainly in Seminary and Graduate School I was exposed to a lot of content, but just didn't hear it. My heart was not hardened except in the arrogance of being an Episcopalian. My early failure as a priest ultimately enabled the gospel to eventually break in and like the Wise Men, on Epiphany I finally began a journey on the right path.

So what does this unusually personal story have to do with you and preaching? If I can begin the journey towards Christianity then anyone can. I didn't know what I lacked so I didn't know to seek it, until I despaired. I was not left alone. I also was not Paul on the road to Damascus. I had much to learn and I have changed much since January 6, 1978, but that night was the night I embraced the need to change. Like the Kings I was looking for something. Finding that something was not a solution. It was the beginning of a journey and fortunately you have been with me on that journey.