

Sharing the Gospel in 2010
Matthew 2: 1 – 18
Makemie Presbyterian Church
January 3, 2010

Matthew 2: 1 - 18

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 & learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go & search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go & pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; & there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it was 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; & they knelt down & paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense & myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream & said, "Get up, take the child & his mother, & flee to Egypt, & remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child & his mother by night, & went to Egypt, & remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by Yahweh through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, & he sent & killed all the children in & around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing & in loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

This Sunday is Star Sunday. A tradition I brought from my home church for the first Sunday of the New Year. Looking back I think it was in 2001 that we started selecting a turned-over star from the offering plate. Of course I didn't realize at the time that a new tradition had begun. I was just seeking ways to emphasize our spiritual gifts & the grace that God imbues us with in a tangible form. Something extra to signify that our faith is a journey; not unlike the journey the magi took to find the star that they sought.

Stars are night music. In their drift across the heavens; a single star is a flat, a few like the constellation the Little Dipper perhaps the Mozart composition, "Twinkle Twinkle." And the Milky Way could be heard as Louis Armstrong blowing a string of 40 high C's on his trumpet.

At one time star gazing was something everyone did; it was THE entertainment; lying out on a hill wondering about the stars in their courses & our own fit in the scheme of the heavenly host. It is I think one of the things that makes gold & silver so valuable, because in earthly form here is the reflection of starlight.

For the Magi star gazing was more than a hobby or entertainment it was a profession. Or so we think. By watching the stars these well you know magi forms the word magician these men could remember the times of year that other stars had appeared what had occurred & so, using this resource,

predict the future based on the past. This is how they came to be known as Wise Men. Along with of course, traveling great distances to seek the child, when many others who lived an hour or two away in Jerusalem couldn't be bothered.

Why is it that when things are local they are not as important? Not that we have an answer, I'm just wondering. Here these magicians traveled great leagues of distance bearing gifts & the local priests & Pharisees couldn't go around the corner? Why do we miss the gifts within? Is it the same sense that near could not be as valid as far?

Our reading this morning is about how far will we go to witness to the gospel, that Jesus Christ was born to save & we are born to worship; that our chief aim in life is to glorify God. And while we are willing to travel great distances to witness are we as willing to get up & travel around the corner, across town, over the river, from Salisbury, Girdletree, Stockton, Virginia to worship together? I think the answer is absolutely, we are. And this year once again, we will increase & come together to worship.

Now at the same time I don't want you all to think of me as a prophet of any kind. To prove to you all that I'm not to be considered a seer I want you to know that back in the day, I bought for my own car, a Gremlin. See? See?

The Gremlin' American Motors' way of making Ford feel good about the Pinto. So now you know, I'm no prophet. But I do know that the gospel has enemies.

It's hard to accept that the gospel has enemies, that good news has enemies, but there it is. As Ted just read a moment ago Herod is intimidated, & all Jerusalem troubled, calling in the doctors of law & Scripture, faking, pretending to want to worship while issuing death warrants against the boy babies; the house-to-house search & the butt of swords crashing in doors, & chariots on the streets, & lamps out early, & mothers clutching babies behind cellar doors. "Shhh, shhh, shhh. Don't even breathe! It's a soldier!"

Why?

Jesus Christ is born.

Joseph sitting up, bolting up in bed, "Mary, Mary, get ready; wrap the child."

"What's the matter?"

"We've got to go."

"What do you mean?"

"I had this dream. They're coming for the boy. They're coming, oh yes, they're coming for the boy. Get ready. We've got to go."

And off to Egypt to hide from his enemies among his enemies. What else was there to do? It's hard to accept. Rachel crying, refusing to be consoled. "They've killed my children; they've killed my children."

Why? Jesus Christ our Lord is born! Good news! It's hard to accept that good news has enemies.

But what's even more difficult to accept is that announcing the Good News creates the enemies. All the wise men said was, "Where is he? We want to worship. All we want to do is worship, have a little worship service. All we want to do is worship Jesus" & trouble broke out.

Do you know how to really release the Serpent hatred in the world? Stir that scaly thing to crawl up from the floor of hell & wreak violence in the earth? Do you know how to get him stirred up? Just start loving everybody & he can't stand it. Do you know how to strengthen & increase the network of lies & deception in our world? Just tell the truth. That's all it takes.

Now Matthew's not alone in this. Even Luke, bless his heart, has to say it. When Jesus was six weeks old they took him to the temple. Mary was nervous. I'm sure she was nervous: first time up there, her first baby.

"Where do I stand? What do they do? Do I have to say anything, Joseph?"

"No, you just stand there & hold the baby. They'll have this little ceremony & then you'll be purified & the baby dedicated. Nothing to it."

"Well, I'm nervous. What if he catches H1N1? We haven't had him outside yet. He's only six weeks old. Why don't they have this at two years? I think it's too early."

"Well just stand there. You'll be all right."

She goes up to the temple & here's this old man, Simeon: old as the hills, large rheumy eyes, undigested-bits-of- meaty- breath, spittle in his beard, shuffling about, because in his heart, God had said, "You will not die until you see the consolation of Israel." So here he is, frightening all the mothers. Every time he sees a blue blanket he runs over. "Yeah, it's a boy; Let me see."

He came to Mary & said, "Let me hold him."

She was scared. Old man; he'll drop my baby. But her fear that he would drop the baby was not near the fear created by his words. You remember? "Because of this child a sword will pierce your heart."

Even Luke has to stop singing long enough to say, "Good News creates pain, violence, & opposition."

We know John says it: "This is the crisis of the world, that light has come into the world & people love the darkness. The time will come when they'll drag you out of the synagogue & they'll kill you in the name of God. In the name of God they'll kill you & say 'Amen.'" How could he have known?

It's hard to accept that the gospel, the Good News, has enemies. But the fact that announcing the Good News arouses these enemies is even more difficult to accept. But it's true. Jesus said in John 15, you will recall, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sinned. But now that I have spoken to them...."

What does that mean? It means that the coming of Jesus Christ & the proclamation of the Good News has aroused the ugliness of sin & violence in the world. And 115 crying women lined up outside the little church in Bethlehem; ask the preacher, "It's already bad enough. Our sons are dead. Keep quiet about the child. Herod is still alive.

You still want to share the Good news?"

But I can tell by our text this morning that God will do everything God can to help us find him; maybe that's the story of these Magi. How God wants to use us to draw a hungry people closer to worship. But even if we fail to hold out the word of life & shine like the stars, God will continue to use us. One of the striking things about these Magi is that for all their legendary wisdom & profound thinking, they are naive. When they arrive in Jerusalem, they think the people who have held the coming-of- the-Messiah prophecy for over 2000 years are actually going to be excited that this thing has happened.

Yet, God's people failed to act on the truth they possessed. The Magi have just made a several months long, hundreds of miles, arduous, dangerous journey across the desert on a hunch. The religious leaders have five miles to travel between Jerusalem & Bethlehem & can't be bothered. And there's another person in this story who possesses truth & does something different with it: Herod. Herod who was notorious for his lavish lifestyle, his pagan ways, his idols & shrines to everybody's gods & his murderous impulses. He was constantly nervous about losing power; he knew the truth about Christ. Of all the people in our text this morning, it's evil Herod who gives the best piece of advice: "Go & make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report that I might go & worship as well."

It's an odd thing to take a bad man's words, but would you heed him on this one? Go & make a careful search for Christ. Go & make a careful search for this child; worship & tell others, that they might worship as well. But also remember that when we stand up & say:

"For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son."
When we stand up & announced that with great cheer & great joy, there is also this story of how Herod heard it & killed all the boy babies in Bethlehem.

So if there is anybody here planning to share the Gospel in 2010, remember it is dangerous but it is also blessed; and you have your star to guide you. Amen.