

The Gift That Mattered Most
Bob Stillerman
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
1-8-2017
Matthew 2:1-12

It's fitting that the Advent and Christmas seasons are bookended by expressions of kingship. Real kingship. God's kingship.

Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the liturgical year, is an acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ. We are reminded that it is not the powers and principalities of this world that rule us, but rather the love and grace of the Christ, and the new definitions and possibilities of kingship such love and grace create.

After Advent and Christmas, we enter into the season of Epiphany, the time when Christ's kingship is revealed not just to the residents of Bethlehem, but to and for all the world.

What symmetry! We close Ordinary time with an acknowledgment of Christ's kingship. We wait expectantly for such a kingship to arrive. And then we learn once more how to recognize its presence.

But we're from the West. And over the years we've paid more attention to Luke's Gospel. We've thrown the wise men into our nativity sets, and our choirs like to sing *We Three Kings* once in January, and the definitions of Frankincense and Myrrh make for good trivia questions. But otherwise, we haven't had much use for the Epiphany story. Besides, we're a week into January, and our Christmas decorations need to come down – Belk is already telling us to get ready for Valentine's Day. We're busy people, and too often, we ask, "Why bother with Epiphany?"

Here's why:

The Epiphany story is a microcosm of the entire Gospel: When we recognize the power and presence of God in our lives, we are met with overwhelming joy. And when we allow such joy to fill our hearts, we are given the power to transform a broken present into a promising future.

Wise men or magi from far-away lands came seeking the new born king. They arrived in Jerusalem, and they made their way to Herod's Palace – the face of the Roman Empire in Palestine. They walked into the gates, and there in front of one of the world's most powerful men, they said: "We've come to pay homage to a new king, a child."

What!?!

Imagine a herd of foreign dignitaries coming to Washington or London, asking to see the President or the Queen, and saying, "Hey Sir/Madam, we're wanting to know if you would point us to the new source of power, the real source of power. We want to pay him homage. We want to offer our whole selves to him."

Herod is frightened by such news. And so are the powers and principalities of today. In a very direct way, (though we'll miss it if we don't pay attention), the wise men put the world and the world's leaders

on notice: “There’s a new source of power, and we’re going to follow him. And guess what? He’s not going to be found in a traditional place like a palace or a city hall. He’s going to be among you and me.”

The wise men follow the star, and eventually they meet the child and his mother. All too often, we remember that they brought him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And to be sure they did. But these were the second gifts they offered.

The text tells us that when our heroes arrived, they were overwhelmed with joy, and they knelt and paid homage to the child. In other words, just like the shepherds, and just like Elizabeth and Simeon and Anna, the wise men recognized immediately that they were in the presence of God. And in such recognition, they offered Jesus their very lives. They recognized that in this child was a person who would devote his every thought, his every action, his entire self to the will of God. They recognized that here was someone whose power and presence could transform the world in a way that earthly powers could not. And so they knelt. And they exclaimed, “My Lord!”

Then, and only then, did they offer Jesus their fine gifts. That’s really important. It’s important because Jesus is not to be served like an earthly king. Earthly kingdoms require treasures and other tangible goods to create a sense of credibility. The wise men are not worthy servants because they present valuable goods. The wise men are worthy servants because they present their whole selves. Herod and other kings value things. God’s kingdom values the heart.

In Matthew’s Gospel, the Epiphany story is a catalyst for recognizing God’s power and presence, and for recognizing kingship. The child will grow to become a prophet and a healer and eventually, Messiah. A centurion, and a few blind men, and a leper, and some fishermen, and a few tax collectors, and a bevy of other believers will follow the example of the wise men. Upon encountering the Christ, they will see in him a power and a presence that is beyond this world. And they will stop in their tracks. And they will offer their allegiance. And they will proclaim: “God is present in the world!” And in such presence, they will find a broken present transformed into a promising future.

The wise men traveled far and wide. They brought many gifts, but the one that mattered most was the gift of their whole selves.

In the year ahead, we too, will travel far and wide. And while this church will gladly accept your gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (especially the gold!), there’s an even better gift to give: ourselves.

This much is certain: God will be revealed in 2017. But if we are to experience an epiphany in this place, it will only come about if we offer ourselves as living sanctuaries and servants to a new king, the king who comes as a child, and offers us a world of love and grace.

My Lord! May it be so!!! Amen.

Snow Day Communion 1-8-2017

It snowed. Well sort of. But snow days won't deter our communion.

You can do this by yourself, or with other members of your household. Or you could even call a friend and exchange the words over the telephone, or a text, or even Facetime or Skype.

What you'll need

Something for bread: your morning toast, a Lance cracker, a dinner roll, a Skittle, whatever you can find. Something for juice/wine: water, or orange juice, or milk, or anything you've got on hand.

Words of Institution

Okay, here goes:

Communion at Sardis is not just a meal. We hope it's a reflection of our hospitality. And so one might ask the question, "Who is welcome at this table?"

All are welcome. Protestant, Catholic, Baptist, recovering-Baptist, no matter! Believer, doubter, somewhere-in-between, no matter. All are welcome, any and every time we gather (physically or virtually).

Since this table is virtual, imagine your friends at Sardis. Picture someone sitting next to you. See their face. Remember a positive experience you've had with this person. Think about how you've shown them love, or they've shown you love. Got the picture? Now offer God thanks for this person.

And just like that, where two are gathered, so too is the Christ.

Many years ago, Jesus gathered the disciples for a final meal. During dinner, he took a loaf of bread, and he broke it, and he said, "This is my body for you! Take and eat."

And after dinner, he poured a glass of wine. And he said, "This is my life-force, poured out for you! Take and drink"

Each time you eat this bread, and each time you drink this wine, you proclaim that I am with you, and you are with me! And each time we share this meal, we reach back through space and time to remember a humble but special invitation to a table – a table that is always open.

Friends, this is the bread of Christ. Take, eat, and remember Christ.

Friends, this is the life-force of Christ. Take, eat, and remember Christ.

And friends, know this: There is always room for you at Christ's table.

Amen.

Sunday School Lesson
Bob Stillerman
1-8-2017
What is Epiphany?

Today, we celebrate Epiphany – we acknowledge the manifestation of God as the child Jesus. Western traditions have emphasized Luke’s telling of the Christmas story, while Eastern traditions have prioritized Matthew’s gospel – the gospel that includes the wise men. Today, we celebrate the event of these men realizing the presence of God in the world.

Read Matthew 1:18-2:18

Matthew 1:18-2:18

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;* and he named him Jesus.

Question:

What differences do you notice when you compare this telling to Luke’s telling?

Possible Answers and Thought Starters:

- **Where is Mary in all of this? Does God offer comfort to Mary, or has this already happened and we don’t know anything about it?**
- **When Gabriel visits Mary in Luke, the angel tells her his purpose – Jesus will be a Davidic figure, Son of God, and bring about a great kingdom. In Matthew, Gabriel tells Joseph that Jesus will save people from their sins. Are these two purposes the same? If not, are they at least similar? Where do the two purposes overlap, and where do they go in different directions.**
- **Matthew doesn’t seem to be concerned with location. On the other hand, Luke spends a bunch of time setting up the location of Bethlehem. In addition, Luke spends an entire chapter of back-story to set up the purpose of both John and Jesus. There is no mention of John in the first two chapters of Matthew.**

The Visit of the Wise Men

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men* from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, '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.' 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah* was to be born. 5They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 "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." '

In both stories, outsiders are the first to hear about the birth of Jesus (Shepherds in Luke, magi from the east in Matthew). Why is it important for each author to establish that God will work from the margins? What changes about each telling if priests and scribes and kings (or other insiders) are the first to hear about Christ's birth?

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men* and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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.' 9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped,* they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Questions:

- **What do you think would have happened if the Wise Men had gone back to Herod?**
- **What do you think the Wise Men told their families when they got back from the long journey?**
- **What kind of Herods do you face in your life? In other words, what revelations have come to you that you've felt the need to keep quiet or to hide from persons of power?**

The Escape to Egypt

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' 14Then Joseph* got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 15and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

Note Matthew's connection to the Pentateuch (first five books of the Torah). The gospel begins with a genealogy of Israel's history, a mini-Genesis. Now there is an escape to Egypt, a mini-Exodus. Jesus will flee, just as Moses did. And later on Jesus will present a new way to think of the Commandments in his Sermon on the Mount. This is very similar to Moses' presentation of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Matthew wants the reader to draw parallels to the ongoing story of Israel.

The Massacre of the Infants

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,* he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.* 17Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

18 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Note: Similar to Exodus, there will be a mass killing of infants, and it will take a miraculous occurrence to save God's chosen leader. Also note that in Exodus, Egypt is a place of danger, but in Matthew it is a place of safety.

Closing Questions:

It seems that every year, Christmas and Epiphany are one-day events. We mark our calendars, and for a few weeks we rejoice in the joy of Christ's coming. But by mid-January, we're back to our busy lives, too occupied to let Christ's coming really sink in. What are ways that we can allow ourselves to experience the epiphany in March or July or September?

What's your favorite telling of Jesus' birth? Does one gospel-telling present more challenges or offer more comfort than another? Do you find both Matthew and Luke helpful? How might you read each gospel next year as you remember the story?