

## Light and Power

Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2021 Epiphany Sunday

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael, CA

*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.*

*Matthew 2:1-12*

I have directed probably 20 Christmas pageants over the years at different churches in my ministry. Like most churches, the scripts usually combined the elements of Luke's Christmas story and Matthew's Christmas story. In the telling and acting it out, there was something human and holy and often humorous. We were not focused on facts, but on the meaning of Jesus' birth and the light of the star and the people who gathered to see this child born and laid in a manger.

I remember directing a pageant at Noe Valley Ministry in San Francisco where I served as a seminary intern. There were not too many children so that year we had a 1<sup>st</sup> grade Joseph and 6<sup>th</sup> grade Mary. I reminded her – please stay seated during the pageant at all times! Jeffrey and I started a new church in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. The services were held in the middle school. The costumes and sets made by talented couple who had done community theater. In the large multi-purpose room, there was a big stage and plenty room to move. On the day of presenting our pageant, our younger son, in his cotton ball sheep costume, starting dancing across the stage. He had never done that in rehearsal! It seemed like the joy of Jesus' birth had come over him and could not help

himself. His new nickname that year – the hammy lamby! In the church I served in New Jersey, the planning team decided to try something new. So we tried an all church pageant that was spontaneous and participatory. During the worship service, at different points in the script, people could choose a part, come up and take a prop or hat or costume and take their place up front on the chancel. Soon the whole congregation was up front. We had a few Marys, many angels, a variety of animals, at least 10 wise men and wise women. We all have our roles in the drama of redeeming and transforming love.

Today we focus on Matthew 2 and how it is part of the biblical Christmas story and can frame our spiritual lives today.

Remember there are two Christmas stories in the Bible: Luke's story and Matthew's story. Luke tells his story among the poor. Matthew sets his story among the rich and powerful. According to Luke, Mary and Joseph must stay near the animals, with no available guest room. Matthew begins with a palace. For Luke, the first circle around the child includes shepherds, unnamed and largely insignificant in their society. Matthew gives a name: King Herod, and points to the chief priests of the Jerusalem temple, the scribes who guarded the scriptures of the nation, and the unusual visitors from a far-off land who travel with wealth. The contrast couldn't be greater. (1)

Each of the Christmas stories reveals the larger theme of the Gospel writer. Luke speaks of Jesus as a prophet and healer for the people. He comes to lift up those often trampled on. He pays attention to those too frequently overlooked. He speaks up on behalf of the last, the least, and the lost. Jesus comes for all the people, especially the forgotten people.

Matthew would agree with all of this, but he sees this as an issue of authority. That's one of his favorite words: authority. Jesus teaches with authority, unlike the Jerusalem scribes. He heals with authority, unlike the healers of his day. Matthew focuses on his light – I am the light of the world. And Jesus tells his followers – You are the light of the world. That bright star in the Christmas story will continue to be a sign, a metaphor for the one born in Bethlehem.

When the wise ones stop by the palace, King Herod is nervous. He doesn't have to be. He could choose to ignore those strange stargazers who knock at the door of the palace. Chasing after a star seems questionable. Those odd wise men don't know where they are going. They are not Jews. Herod could brush off the whole business, snatch their gold, and send them back to Persia.

But he doesn't do that. Herod has a crown, but he is not the king. He may live in a palace, but he doesn't rule over very much. He has subjects beneath him and can enforce his will, but he has no real power over them. The historical record of King Herod is clear: he was a terrible

person. Arrogant and vain, unfaithful to multiple wives, demanding loyalty but never showing loyalty, suspicious to a fault – Matthew says he may be the king, but he’s not really the king.

The wise men from the East are asking, “Where’s the king? The newborn king? The real king? Where is the One who rightfully deserves our hearts?”

That’s the big question in the Gospel of Matthew: where is the true king?

When children or adults participate in a Christmas pageant, there is sometimes animated discussions about crowns and gifts and who will play which part. But I am reminded of a story I read by another pastor who was reading the Christmas story to the children in her church. A little boy was not as interested in the main characters or how many wisemen there were. He had another question.

*At a family friendly Christmas Eve service years ago, I sat down on the floor at the front of the church, ...and read a book with the kids, retelling the story of Jesus’ birth according to Luke. We looked at the pictures and talked about what was happening, and a couple of kids asked loud and funny questions. But one of the smallest boys, in a very quiet voice the other adults couldn’t quite hear, sat right in front of the book and asked me the same question, over and over: on each page, he would point to someone and ask me, “Is that a bad guy?”*

*At first I answered, “No, that’s a shepherd,” or “No, that’s just a person,” but after a few pages I had to start ignoring him. The thing is, there aren’t really any bad guys in Luke’s version of the nativity.*

*In Matthew’s version, however, which I can’t imagine any church reads on Christmas Eve — at least not in full,..—there is one very bad guy: Herod the Great. As you read Matthew 2, and his plans to kill all the baby boys, he sounds stomach-churningly familiar: a classic tyrant, paranoid, ready to use lies and violence against any threat to his power. (2)*

So this has given me a new framework for this story this year. When I think about our passage from Matthew, it is a story with many layers that invite us in. I have preached on this passage many times in the past.

Sometimes I have focused on about a long journey and what it means for us on our journeys to go with others in search of a deeper truth and Divine love.

Sometimes I have focused on the light of Christ leading and guiding us, starlight, light in the darkness and what that light means today for us.

Sometimes I have focused on this story that points to God’s welcome to gentiles and people of all nations. The light and love of Christ are universal.

But this year I can't help but read it as a story about power: the depraved, fearful power of King Herod, what it drives him to do, and what a contrast his power is to the power of Jesus.

King Herod commits acts that are violent and evil. In his effort to remove a perceived threat and to try to hold onto the power he thinks he has, he directs his thugs to kill all the baby boys under two years of age. Infanticide. The power of Herod is brutal, reactive, and paranoid. Like that little kiddo in church on Christmas Eve, Herod sees bad guys everywhere he looks.

But the power of God is not like that. What if God's power is just the opposite? The kingdom of Christ is a different picture. What if the Christ has a different kind of power? This power of God is subversive, vulnerable, and life-giving.

What if Holy Power is not a takeover but seeking and finding, going home by another way, second chances, and the spreading of good news like seeds, near and far, good news that changes people from the inside out?

We are living through a time when many people seem to wish that the power of God would be more like the power of Herod. It's a time when many people are looking for bad guys.

The story of the Epiphany—and all of the Christmas story—is the beginning of a long story about how God uses power in Jesus not to overpower us, but to dwell among us and in us and love through us.

This is the Good News of Christmas. The story of birth in Bethlehem frees us from the counterfeit dominions of the world. It's life-giving. As a sign of this, the wise men fall to their knees. They bow down to honor the Christ child and bring the gifts they brought fit for a king – gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In the middle of it all, they offer one thing more. Notice what it is? Joy. They are "overwhelmed with joy." They bend their knees in joy. All the hopes that there truly can be love and justice on earth are unveiled by this Vulnerable Child.

I take this story seriously and but not literally. We can notice the ways Matthew tells this story to draw us in more deeply.

When these wise ones were in Christ's presence, it  
stirred their emotions (they were overwhelmed with joy),  
moved their bodies (to kneel down and worship),  
overflowed in generosity of spirit (they gave him extravagant, heart-felt gifts),  
and opened them to spiritual guidance for their next steps  
(which came to them in a dream.)

These wise ones were probably more comfortable living and leading from their heads, but to be overwhelmed by joy...to have a visceral experience of worship...to receive Holy guidance through a dream ...*this* was a new kind of journey. Eventually they would return home (by a different way) but they would be changed.

As we begin a new year and pray for an end to the pandemic and healing for our country, may we let joy break forth like starlight in the darkness.

Let us know we are beloved and we are not forgotten.

Nor have we been abandoned to the worst of our human impulses.

Let us go into this new year on a new road and into a new season with hope as we seek to live into the kin-dom of God. Amen.

1) Rev. William Carter, "Christmas On Your Knees," 12/24/19 billcartersermons.blogspot

<https://billcartersermons.blogspot.com/2019/12/christmas-on-your-knees.html>

2) Heidi Haverkamp, "January 3, Epiphany," 12/8/20, Christian Century

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/january-3-epiphany-matthew-21-12>