

By Another Way

Martha Langford

Third Presbyterian Church

January 5, 2014 (Epiphany Sunday)

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-14

Matthew 2:1-12

It is the second Sunday since we celebrated the birth of Jesus. In these past weeks, we've been invited into the story through scripture and hymn, through verse and song, and through play—the classic re-enactment of the Festival of the Nativity.

We've watched and waited, sung of our yearnings and of our joy as the Bethlehem story unfolded before us.

It has been a story about journeys. Emotional journeys: from fear to awe and from incredulity to joy; and physical journeys:

The betrothed couple, Mary and Joseph, journey to Bethlehem to register in the census. The baby arrives, not unexpectedly—after all, nine months is nine months—but we cannot help but feel surprise that such a sacred event happens in such an unexpected place: a room adjoining the stable, hay manger doubling as a crib.

I can just hear the word spreading among the neighbors—“...she had to put the baby in the **manger! Can you imagine?**”

It is also a journey of revelation from yearning into awareness—for while Mary and Joseph know who this child is others will need godly birth announcements to lead the way.

In Luke's gospel angels journey from heaven announcing good news to simple shepherds. Shepherds journey from their fields and flocks and find their way through the twisting streets of Bethlehem; all to find the child lying in a manger.

Finally, in our piece of the story for this morning... A star appears in the night sky—revealing to knowing eyes the birth of a king.

The story in Matthew's gospel is so simple, so familiar, so comforting, isn't it? Three kings, bearing gifts, following a star... But there is more to it, isn't there.

Matthew tells us the visitors came from that greatly unspecific place known as the “East” which some scholars imagine to be modern day Iran or Iraq. They might have been astrologers, or seers, or oracles, or even Zoroastrian priests. We aren't sure—outside of legend—who and what they were.

We **do know** what they were NOT! They were not people of the covenant, not descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. Our magi take their place in the crèche as strangers—outsiders who’ve come seeking after a foreign king.

And this was no casual undertaking. If you come due west, after crossing the Euphrates River, the journey would cover 400 miles of wilderness before reaching the River Jordan. The wilderness crossing alone would have taken 10 days by camel caravan, or 20 days on foot.

There are words for such a journey: arduous... hazardous... LUDICROUS! Just ask the whispering neighbors.

Using a certain cultural logic, they made their way to Jerusalem, the seat of Jewish power. But they didn’t find any evidence of a royal birth.

And here we find that wise men can ask for directions!

They gained an audience with the king—Herod the Great—and then asked a simple question: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

This question sent shock waves through the king and his court and all of Jerusalem. You see, Herod’s sons are adults, and he has already executed the oldest two for plots against the throne.

Yet, despite his powerful paranoia, Herod heard their question with ears that were Jewish. He translates the question of an infant king into the search for the Messiah—who is Christ the Lord.

The directions come from the prophet Micah. Imagine the scribes and priests unrolling the scroll and reading, “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.”

The star’s heavenly destination is now revealed to all the leaders and the learned people in Jerusalem. This elder king and his wise men have provided the last bit of information needed to help the star proclaim the birth of the Christ to all who seek him—even foreign star-gazers.

In his text, we see how Matthew has carefully woven the reference from Micah, with images from the prophet Isaiah, “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Yet, Herod and his court and his scribes and his priests and the people of Jerusalem did not pick up and travel the arduous, hazardous, ludicrous five mile journey to Bethlehem.

The magi go alone.

The shepherds heard good tidings of great joy, and the magi saw the star, and as the revelation washes over them, they responded and followed the good news to Bethlehem. The poor and the powerless, the wealthy and wise, they came to pay homage to the Christ child, to give themselves over entirely to God's grace come down in human form.

We might wonder why Herod and the courtiers and the scribes and the priests didn't go with the magi—we might, but in our hearts don't we know?

As Isaiah predicted the people are living in a time of deep darkness. Herod is king but only at the pleasure of the Caesar in Rome. The Jews are conquered people, Israel is a vassal state.

Herod was filled with paranoia and grandiosity—his building projects were legendary: the Second Temple, Masada, the Herodium, Caesarea Maritima, portions of which stand today. The taxes to support Rome and these building projects were crushing.

The people who worked government projects were okay, but the poor and the needy were undoubtedly oppressed, and their poverty served to cut them off even from the communal practices of the temple.

But the promised Messiah, THE MESSIAH, will sweep that all away...

The Psalmist tells us that David's messianic heir will judge with righteousness and justice. *"...he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper.... From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight."*

It is a time to rejoice—sing *Joy to the World!* ...Unless your power is the power of the oppressor.

It is no wonder Herod, and the scribes, and the chief priests, and indeed all of Jerusalem were frightened by the question of these magi, for such liberation might sweep them all away.

WE recognize the darkness of Jerusalem—do we not?—for we know a little of oppression.

We see the poor and the hungry here week by week—seeking groceries, a hot meal, and healing hospitality.

We see the people on the streets of our city who will not have a bed—not even a manger this evening—seeking shelter, a safe space, and the comfort of being welcomed in from out of the cold.

We read about the injustices of our justice system that sentence a civil rights activist to 10 years jail while releasing a young man responsible for four deaths while driving under the influence—excused on the grounds of affluenza.

We watch it on the nightly news as word of gun violence, open warfare, disease and disaster, political manipulation and rampant greed erode our capacity for compassionate response, and make us numb.

We bring it with us each week, as we mourn our own losses and our own limitations and the brokenness that threads its way through our lives—reflective of the broken world that surrounds us.

We bring all these people and all these places, all our outrage and all our brokenness, and we yearn for the light, for Isaiah's promised redemption—for a world that is filled with justice and peace and compassion.

And we come to the Christ...

Perhaps Madeleine L'Engle captures it best ...

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait

till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Our story this morning is the story of the gospel. Our journey like that of the magi. For when our yearning seeks direction, the stories of our God lead us to the Christ and bid us to bow down. The journey to Bethlehem calls us to give ourselves over completely to the grace of God incarnate; to align our hearts with the justice, peace, and compassion that is the light of God shining into the darkness.

We are called to this journey; to the adoration and wonder and surrender of it day by day and year by year. To live with a strange joy that is in itself a symbol of hope.

So our story begins even as this story ends. The Magi fade from sight, “warned in a dream not to return to Herod,” so “they left for their own country by another way...”

And I wonder... as we journey forth this day and each day, how will our way be changed by the Christ whom we meet here?

Let me close with a prayer, from Walter Brueggemann from his book: *Prayers for a Privileged People*.

On Epiphany day,

we are still the people walking.

We are still people in the dark,

and the darkness looms large around us,

beset as we are by fear,

anxiety,

brutality,

violence,

loss —

a dozen alienations that we cannot manage.

We are — we could be — people of your light.

So we pray for the light of your glorious presence

as we wait for your appearing;

we pray for the light of your wondrous grace

as we exhaust our coping capacity;

we pray for your gift of newness

that will override our weariness;

we pray that we may see and know and hear and trust

in your good rule.

That we may have energy, courage, and freedom

to enact your rule through the demands of this day.

We submit our day to you and to your rule, with deep joy and high hope.

AMEN.