

“The Magi”
Sermon delivered 1-10-10
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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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, 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.'" ⁷Then 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. ¹³Now 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." ¹⁶When 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."

January 6 was Epiphany, the twelve days of Christmas concluded on that day, and we began a new season called Epiphany, leading up to Ash Wednesday and Lent. Ah-ha moments are known as “epiphany moments.” Epiphany is about seeing signs of the sacred in the world. It is about the main thing.

Stephen King wrote a book in 1991 with the title *Needful Things*. In a small town called Castle Rock, Maine, a gift shop is opened by a nice old man named Leland Gaunt. The items in the store are things people believe to be the most important things in their lives, and they couldn't live without them. Leland offers to trade people for the items they desire by asking the folks to play a prank on another person in the town. Leland turns out to be the devil himself, having gone all over the world selling junk to people who thought they were consuming the item of their deepest desire. What they failed to notice as they walked into his store was the sign over the door saying "Buyer Beware". As we move into a New Year we are called in this season of Epiphany to look at what we are "buying into" as the most important thing in our lives. What is deeply sacred to you in life? How is God present in the ordinariness of life for you?

Our Gospel lesson this morning illustrates this perfectly, by showing us the contrast between the Magi and Herod. A contrast between the junk food we feed our souls, and the health our souls demand. As one Pastor said, we need to put Herod back into Christmas. This is why I added the "rest of the story" to the Gospel reading this morning for Epiphany. Jesus didn't come into a sweet Hallmark Christmas Card world. He entered a world of political and economic oppression. Herod came into being from 70 BC to 4 BC. He died at 66. 4 BC was the year Jesus was born. We know that Jesus was born before Herod died because Herod had all the baby boys killed under the age of two, about 25 according to most historians.

Now some of you may wonder, doesn't AD and BC mean before Christ and after Christ... well yes, however when Dionysius put the calendar together in 527 AD put the birth of Jesus at zero however he was off by 4 years, not factoring in the death of Herod. Nonetheless, putting Herod back into Christmas helps us understand the birth of Jesus, and the contrast of the Magi. When Augustus appointed Herod in 37 BC, the dark King became evident by the slaughter of 300 Jewish leaders, and the Sanhedrin, and as we see in our Gospel, was so threatened he had all the baby boys under age two slaughtered, we call the slaughter of the innocents. At the same time Herod became great because he, being half Jewish, built the beautiful Temple. During the famine in 25 BC he melted the gold plates in his treasury to buy food during the famine.

So, toward the end of his life, the Magi appear in Jerusalem searching for the newborn king. Now as you know, we are more influenced by legend than we are by history. We don't know how many men showed up, we only know there were 3 gifts. We don't know their nationalities or their names. We know the song "We three Kings of the Orient" but our Gospel doesn't mention kings. They were called "magi".

It is important for you to know that the Magi from which we get our word magician were originally from Persia, and they were dream interpreters, fortune tellers, and palm readers. They were like these horoscope writers with psychic hotlines to

the universe with a deck of tarot cards. Even the apostle Paul refers to the Jewish Magi as “child of the devil and the enemy of everything that is right...full of every that is of deceit and trickery” (Acts 3:10).

Nevertheless, the Magi in our story follow the star that stops over Jerusalem, so they thought, given as Jerusalem is a religious center. In the “secret meeting” called by Herod, they were asked to search for the child and to let him know. Then they followed the star and were “overwhelmed with Joy” when they knelt down to “pay homage” to the child. Joy is a byproduct of seeing the sacred, the hand, and the presence of God in the world and in your life. Where is this joy for you? This is a difficult question for most of us to answer, so we settle for the pseudo in following stars that will never stop at any place we can call home. We chase this star and that star, hoping to get something, and when we get it, the it seems to fade and we start the chase again with the search for a new job, make-over, a new treadmill with the carrot. What a tragedy!

Some of us are so fear based in our lives, that the joy of life doesn't even enter into our equation, or blip on our radar screen. We have some choices to make, regardless of where we find ourselves this morning. We, like the Magi, can get stuck and trapped by the Herod's of this world. But we can move on, move on in our search for the true King and the true Joy. The Herod's of our world and culture kill the childlike wonder and mystery in all of us.

Herod is a part of the Christmas Story, and our Story. As Walter Brueggman reminds us, Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem. The Magi were off by nine miles when looking in Jerusalem. We are invited to travel those hard demanding miles away from the Jerusalem of self sufficiency. We are invited again to look at what the Leland Gaunt's of the world are selling us, and what we are buying instead of focusing on the main thing in our lives.

It is never too late. As the angelic message said to Joseph in the dream, “you better go in a different direction or you and your family and your newborn son are going to be hurt.” This is a time to focus. This is the beginning of a New Year. Do you need to go home a different way in your life to claim the Joy of the Good News of Jesus Christ in your life?