

## Epiphany of the Lord (Year A)

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*Matthew 2:1-12*

*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.*

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King Herod was anxious - the kind of anxiety that only infects those in power who are deeply afraid of losing it. He received a visit from some wise men from the East who were looking for a newborn king? Their query must have alerted something deep within Herod's psyche because he responds with panic. Matthew's text tells us that he was not the only one who felt the same way. Apparently, word had spread rather quickly and all of Jerusalem grew fearful. The inhabitants of Jerusalem probably knew full well that the most dangerous type of ruler is one who feels threatened. There was unrest and unrest leads to unpredictable things. Therefore, King Herod wanted to nip this in the bud.

Calling the wise men, these stargazers, into his private quarters, he compelled them to follow this star and to find this newborn king. With a political duplicitousness that revealed his insecurity, Herod implored the wise men to do a little recon mission to find this "king" and return with knowledge about his whereabouts. His reason, we are told, was so that he himself could go and "pay him homage." However, we all know what that really meant: he wanted to eliminate this threat.

So the wise men travel the long road to Bethlehem. Although tradition tells us that there were three of them, Matthew's Gospel, the only gospel to mention the wise men, makes no mention of how many they were. Instead, we have been told there were three most likely because of the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We are left to imagine what was the content of their conversation as they trod that starlit path. Did they travel in awkward silence? Did they wonder what it was they were going

to find? Did they discuss how weird it was that this king wanted to pay homage to this newborn baby? Did they sense trouble afoot? We don't know.

What we do know is that once the star stopped moving, they were overwhelmed with joy. We all know the feeling - the joy that is found when we've finally arrived at our destination and the children have finally stopped asking "are we there yet?" The joy that wearied travelers feel when they have finally found the opportunity to kick back and relax a little. But perhaps the joy of these wise men was deeper than that. Perhaps their overwhelming joy was a result of discovering something new, something different, something holy, something that probably they themselves could not fully describe despite their many years of enlightenment and wisdom.

They find the newborn baby. One would think that after all that travel with the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, that they would be eager to be rid of it and give them to this newborn king. However, presenting the gifts was not the first thing that they did. Instead, they felt compelled to fall to their knees and worship the king. The gospel-writer Matthew makes clear the stark contrast in how the wise men treat these two kings that they have now met. The first king they met was, of course, Herod. However, Matthew makes no mention of any pomp and circumstance revolving around this encounter. Instead, it was awkward and probably left them with a weird feeling in their stomachs.

However, when the wise men encounter *this* king, their reaction is marked by complete reverence. When they gazed upon the baby Jesus, no word had to be spoken to tell them that *this* encounter was a holy one. And so they did what many people do when they find a beautiful holiness, they dropped to their knees and worshiped him.

After completing their first, and perhaps most important task, they then moved onto their second one. They present the baby Jesus with the kingly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although Mary might have preferred instead gifts of diapers, a foot massage, and a nice bottle of Merlot, the importance of these gifts is that these were gifts meant for a king. Matthew wanted his readers to be absolutely sure that Jesus Christ is king. The Gospel of Matthew forces King Herod to stand in complete contrast to the newborn Jesus. Although Herod called himself a king, Matthew wants us to know who the *real* king is. The real king is the one lying upon his mother's breast. The real king is the one who will grow to be the savior of the nations. The real king is the one who will usher in a reign of peace and inclusivity, not violence and oppression.

The wise men must have come to this revelation because they decide not to return to Herod. They, in their wisdom, must have understood Herod's malicious intentions and they, instead, left for their own country by another road, taking care to put many miles between them and the political figure who wished death upon the holiness they just encountered.

Today, as we continue to welcome new year with new opportunities and challenges, I am reminded that we should always be mindful of the gifts that we bring to Jesus Christ. I doubt if he would much care for gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh nowadays. I imagine he would request much more valuable gifts, gifts of kindness, humility, and peace towards all people. Jesus Christ is the light that has broken forth in the world. Jesus Christ illuminates our way but the real question is this: what gifts will we bring to respond to this incarnation of God-with-us?

The wise men were wise enough to recognize that this was no ordinary child. We, too, are called to recognize Jesus as nothing less than our true king, the one whom we are called to follow each and every day. However, we must not fool ourselves into thinking that the presentation of our gifts to him are

secluded to a one-time encounter every Christmas. The gifts that we bring Jesus Christ are not meant to only make their appearance on Sunday mornings at 10:30 at 32 North Ferry Road. It is not that those gifts are not important, it's simply that it's the gifts we give Jesus "on the road" that make an even stronger difference.

Today's passage leaves me with a huge curiosity: how were the wise men's lives changed *after* they left the newborn king? How were they called to act differently on that road that led them home by another way? You see, you and I are called to go home by another road each and every time we encounter Christ our King. When we encounter Christ, he challenges us to act differently, to live differently, to give differently, to worship differently. When left to our own devices, we more often than not choose the path of least resistance. We choose the path that is easiest.

It was Robert Frost who so famously wrote:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
and that has made all the difference.*

Like the wise men, we are called by Christ to take the road less traveled. We look around us and we see many roads that lead to bigotry, hatred, ignorance, anger, and selfishness. Those roads have been traveled far too often. However, there is a road that is less traveled, a road that follows Christ into places where kindness is the order of the day and righteousness and justice is the ultimate goal. That road, my friends, is the one less traveled. May we follow Christ and go home by another way. Let us travel that road together and see what gifts Christ calls us to give to him and, more importantly, to the world that he has come to save.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.