

Sermon 12-08/09-2018  
Do You Feel the Advent Trouble?  
Matthew 2:1-6

*2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men<sup>[a]</sup> from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,<sup>[b]</sup> and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup> **When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;** <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah<sup>[c]</sup> was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:  
<sup>6</sup> ‘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<sup>[d]</sup> my people Israel.’”*

1)

Can I talk to you about feelings a bit today? How do you feel these days? Do you feel rushed? December and the season of Advent are a very rushed time for many of us. Just last week I had a conversation with Ms. Christine about making arrangements regarding childcare for our Festival of Carols. It was very telling to me when I heard her say:

*“Ok, so we need to line up some volunteers for the nursery for Festival of Carols next week...wait, ‘next week!’ – is it next week already? How did we get so far into December?”*

Do you sometimes feel that December moves faster than other months? I wonder what happened – as a child it always felt like an eternity to make it through the 24 little doors of my chocolate Advent calendar. These days – not so much! December feels rushed...

December and being rushed... Advent and being rushed... Advent...hm! Advent means arrival or coming, the coming of Jesus. What does it mean that I feel rushed in the season when God invites me to prepare for the arrival of Jesus? I don't know how I feel about that?

When Christians talk about the arrival/coming of Jesus in Advent it has a twofold meaning:

- 1) We always wait for Jesus to arrive in our hearts in new ways as we prepare for the Christmas celebration.
- 2) And we are always invited to wait for Jesus' arrival in glory – for his grand second coming.

Does that latter thought sometimes disturb you? How do you feel about imagining the physical return of Jesus as the second person of the Trinity?! Do you ever feel troubled about it?

I actually want to invite you to hold and confront this feeling. Feeling troubled by the Advent of Jesus is not so unusual!

Today we heard the story about the arrival of the Wise Men in Jerusalem. It's a story we normally don't hear until after Christmas, because historically they didn't get to see Jesus until quite a few days (maybe even months) after he was born.

We are meditating on this story *today*, on this 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend of Advent, because it is a story about how people **felt** at the first Advent of history and I believe we can related this to how we may feel as we deal with Advent today.

Wise Men come from the East, they are astrologers, dream interpreters, pre-modern scientists. They saw something in the sky that was so powerful that they took upon them a long journey to figure out what this was all about.

They interpret that someone powerful was born in Israel. And so they go to this holy land and check in at the center of power: the court of the king in Jerusalem.

They inquire about the arrival/ the Advent of Jesus. They don't know his name is Jesus, they call him "the king of the Jews." Ironically, they ask the current king of the Jews, King Herod about this newborn king of the Jews. Imagine what he must have felt like. The Bible actually tells us:

**When King Herod heard this, he was troubled...** -V3a

Of course he felt troubled... He knew that his kingship was not solidly legit, the Romans put him in power and he wasn't even a real Jew himself. Of course he would feel troubled by the arrival of a newly born legit Messiah-king of the Jews that his subjects were anticipating.

But interestingly, Herod is not the only one who feels troubled by the Advent of Jesus.

This is where the story of the Wise Men gets real for you and I. We are not kings, none of us. The vast majority of us sitting here today would never identify ourselves with the emotions of King Herod. But he's not the only one who's scared:

**...and all Jerusalem with him** - V3b

I'm tempted to take the Bible literally here! It may very well be that when Matthew says that "all Jerusalem" was troubled with Herod, that he only had powerful officials from Herod's palace in mind. Those who benefited from Herod's corrupt rule.

But you know, maybe it was indeed all of Jerusalem that was troubled by Jesus' **first** coming – including devout good people.

Because the arrival of the Messiah meant radical change. And change is scary, no matter how devout you are!

Maybe the same is true for "all" of us today who hear about the **second** coming of Jesus.

I don't know a lot of people who think about the second coming of Jesus today and feel like saying: *"Ah, I look so much forward to this, I can't wait, I wish it was tomorrow."* I know a very few, but not many. Imagining the return of Jesus in glory has troublesome aspects to it. Yes, there is something in my soul that longs for it – especially when I think about terrible injustices and hardships that are going on in our world. But I can't deny that the thought of Christ's physical return has troublesome, even scary implications.

When I admit this feeling I can find myself in the crowds of Jerusalem. When they heard about the first coming of Jesus from the Wise Men, they were troubled about it and that does not necessarily mean that they were all as crooked as Herod was.

I think it requires some honesty to allow yourself the comparison with the troubled crowd of Jerusalem. Do you want to be that honest today? I invite you to. When you think about Christ's second coming, how do you honestly feel about it?

We are a great congregation! We are diverse in our political and theological convictions. That is a strength of ours that we haven't even begun to realize, let alone unpack and apply. I believe God can use First Church in mighty ways because we model that you don't have to be a church of uniformity when it comes to spiritual and societal convictions.

When it comes to the second coming of Jesus there is no doubt that we have diverse ways to deal with it:

- Some of us probably don't believe in a literal second coming and see it as a metaphysical reality – some scholars go that route too.

- There is probably no doubt that some of us believe it is a historical reality that has already occurred and continuously occurs throughout human history – some theologians go that route also.

- And there is no doubt that some of us fully expect Christ to return in glory to conclude history – soon, or maybe not so soon (I am one of them).

No matter which group you belong to, be honest with yourself. Face your Advent feelings and see if there is something troublesome in you too as you ponder the Advent of Christ (...). This honesty may just help you to open your doors for Christ to arrive in your heart today and that my friends is what truly counts, because it changes the ways how you live with others today.

2)

There are lots of "others" in your life! I mean, people that are different than you. Just as different as those Wise Men were compared to the crowds of Jerusalem! I refer to them as Wise Men but grammatically speaking there could have been women among them also! The original word "magi" is a gender neutral plural word (...).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/simply-spirit/epiphany-wise-women>

Here is my question: Why were those magi/Wise Men not troubled? Why were they willing to travel so far to check out what's going on in the holy land? There is a small chance that the Wise Men were mildly Jewish or at least Jewish-influenced from the time of the Israelites spending in Babylonia which is where the Wise Men were from. But it is much more likely that they were secular, or pagan, non-Jewish persons.

Now think about what that means. It means that God has heathens (I mean this literally, not offensively) tell the believers about Christ – the believers are troubled, the heathens are looking for Christ. Wow! There is no doubt that Matthew wants to tell us something with that: Heathens can be drawn to Christ too. Let's use other language for that: Secular people can tell believers about Christ. Ah, that is absolutely mind-boggling. How do we translate this into our age?

I don't want to fabricate a doctrine out of it – BUT... I must say this:

**If God was capable to attract non-Jewish people to inquire and search for the Jewish Messiah, then God can attract non-Christians today to inquire and search for the Son of God.**

Do you think this is a solid biblical analysis? I do and so did Matthew.

You are not a secular audience, you are the church, and as people of God's church I want to encourage you:

- 1) Find **yourself** in the Wise Men/Women. Do it like them. Let your curiosity and honesty draw you to inquire about Jesus. Ask questions, investigate – use science if necessary. God can be found on many avenues.
- 2) Find **God** in the Wise Men/Women! Have an open heart toward the secular people in your family, neighborhood and among your co-workers and friends. Just because they don't go to church or don't profess an orthodox faith does not mean that God won't invite them to search for Jesus.

Do not become an obstacle for them, rather become an encourager for them. You may be the final link in God's chain of events to draw them. You may be called to be the person that presents them with a flyer or a heartfelt invitation to our Christmas Eve service or Festival of Carols, the Longest Nite or our Christmas Play.

Do it – don't hesitate, just do it. Don't worry that an invitation to a Christmas service will estrange you from your friends. People get invited to all sorts of things – why not to church. Wise Men and Women still search for Christ and they will gladly accept help on the way.

Is that a deal?

Be honest with yourself – don't deny your own feelings of trouble with Advent – use the trouble to be good and to do good. Amen?