

Sermon, 1-2-2022, Brian Jones

Good morning. It's a blustery day here on the coast. And it's a lonely day here at St. Luke and St. Stephen. I can't tell you how hard it is to look out and see empty pews. Of course, Evelyn is here, and Mary Lee is here with us. But other than that, I'm looking at an empty church. And I know that you feel the same way. This is difficult, but hopefully if our scientists are right, this will not be a long session and the COVID virus that is in the variant Omicron will go away, or at least resolve in some sense.

I want to talk about the story from Matthew's Gospel. And I want to speak, first, as a historian about it. The Magi. Matthew does not say that there were three Magi. He says only that there were three gifts. Later readers of this story transformed gold, frankincense and myrrh into Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior. Really. There weren't three. Despite all the songs, despite all our history, we don't know how many there were. There were at least two because the word is plural. Magi. But maybe six, maybe even 10. Really, it doesn't matter. It's OK to think of three Magi. Matthew didn't tell us, but we can imagine that.

Matthew tells us that the Magi were from "the east." Most likely, he had in mind Persia, modern day Iran. They were not kings. This also comes as a great disappointment. Despite our songs, despite our history, the Magi were not kings. They were a combination of astrologer, magician, and fortune teller. They were often priests, followers of the Zoroastrian religion. Magi read the signs and predicted outcomes. People came to them for guidance. Even kings sought their advice. The king wonders, "Should I go to war? Should I make this alliance? Call in the Magi." But Magi were more than soothsayers. They were the ancient equivalent of modern scientists. They studied the stars, interpreted the signs of nature, consulted secret books, and conferred with one another in dark rooms. They tried to predict and thereby gain some control over the future. Wouldn't we all like to do that?

And then there's the star--the ancients believed that human destiny was written in the night sky. For that matter, many modern people also believe that. Predicting the birth of a king by watching the stars was what Magi did. The fact that they made a long journey surprises me, but perhaps it was not exceptional for Magi to journey a long distance to bring gifts to a child born to be king. After all, it's a good thing to be on the right side of

history. And the idea that a traveler could follow a star would not have surprised an ancient reader; there are other stories from the ancient world about people following stars. But the idea that a star could hover over a small house, that is surprising. In our age, a star standing over a single house is judged impossible. But it was common among people of that time to think of stars as angelic beings. And so, a star descending to hover over a single house would have seemed astonishing, but not impossible.

And then there's Herod. He was a violent, insecure, and paranoid ruler who claimed the title "king of the Jews." We know about him from the Jewish historian Josephus and a few other texts. The problem Herod had was that he wasn't a Jew. He was Idumean whose family had converted to Judaism. He was a "client king," a king who had essentially bought his way into power. He most certainly was not an anointed Jewish king. And he was not from the line of David. Herod knew this, and he knew that his Jewish subjects knew this, so he did things to paper over his bogus claim. He married a Jewish woman. He vastly improved and expanded the temple in Jerusalem. And he acted the part of Jewish King as best he could. An act that was limited by his need to keep Rome happy.

Well, his sham credentials probably fed his paranoia. How paranoid was he? He had one of his wives executed. He had two of his own sons executed because he was afraid they were plotting against him. He was notorious for his ruthlessness toward any who opposed him or whom he suspected of opposing him. He was impulsive and dangerous. People in the first century knew his reputation, and they would have had no trouble imagining him killing children.

Timing. Matthew has the Magi visit Jesus as a toddler, not when he was a baby. Herod ordered the slaying of all infants in Bethlehem under the age of two, and the Magi had seen the star marking his birth before they began their long journey. So, Jesus must have been at least three months old, probably closer to two years of age when the Magi visited. Again, a little disappointing because many of our tableaus of the nativity out in front of churches and on our coffee tables have the kings and the shepherds and the drummer boy and a number of other people present. But that's what we do with traditions. We've kind of put them all together.

But enough history. Historical background is useful for understanding the story. It helps, but it does not tell us what the story is about. It does not tell us what the story means. The story is about journeying, searching, hoping and, yes, finding. It's about Magi, who read the signs and follow a star, their hearts skipping with joy. They're standing outside a little house with shining eyes and hearts full. Did they call out? Did they call out or did they knock? What is the protocol on the threshold of a house when you arrive to greet a child king?

Was it night? I think it must have been. The star stood over the house and would have been hard to see in the daylight. The star, the celestial finger that had for many weeks pointed the way "over field and fountain, moor and mountain." And now it pointed to a single small house. Inside was the one born to be king of the Jews. Can you imagine how they felt? Matthew says, "They rejoiced, great joy, exceedingly."

The translators smoothed that out, but that's how the Greek sounds. They rejoiced, great joy, exceedingly. Maybe they didn't have to knock to announce themselves. After all, a band of Magi would have been a spectacle in a small village like Bethlehem-- wealthy foreigners strangely dressed, hurraing one another in a foreign language. Can you imagine that in a small town like Bethlehem? By the time they arrived at Mary and Joseph's door, the whole town would have been looking out their windows, standing in their doors, wondering what is going on. Watching, wondering.

I'm sitting watching my three-year-old grandson play. He's chattering away, telling me all about it. He has a new toy. He's explaining to grandpa how to make it work. I wonder, was Jesus playing with his toys when the Magi arrived? Or was he asleep? Was he chattering away or breathing softly? Did he hide in the folds of Mary's robe when these very strange men entered the house? Matthew tells us only this: "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." But that translation is too tame. The Greek says they "fell down and worshiped him." Jewish tradition forbade worship of any but God alone. But then the Magi were not Jews. And they worshiped him.

What is this story about? It's about a child born to be king of the Jews. But more, much, much more. It is about God incarnate as a fragile child. It's about God among us as us, as all of us -- Jew, Persian, Arab, Anglo, Latino... The Magi represent all nations. And

the races are represented, in a sense symbolically. I think we're all there at the house. All nations fall down before him.

Less happily, the story is about paranoid and duplicitous rulers – who pretend to worship God but have deadly intentions. It's about the Herods of every age and place who resist the reign of God and would rather kill than worship. "Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely." That's Herod. He says piously, "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." Yeah, right. He says this to wise men, and they are not fooled.

Herod never sees them again. Perhaps later he hears from his spies that the Magi left by a back road. Frustrated, paranoid, in a royal rage he orders the slaughter of children. Horrible. The story is about Herods who love power but not God, neither God nor their neighbor, only themselves.

Ultimately, the story is about God. About the God of heaven who commands stars to point the way. The God who descends to us as a child, fragile, endangered, dependent. The God who speaks in dreams, who warns Mary and Joseph to flee in the middle of the night carrying only a few things, fleeing by night down to Egypt to wait until the danger passes with the precious child along. And the danger does pass. Herod dies not very long after. A few years. Birth and death, both are in God's hands. So, Herod dies. Happily, mortality puts a limit on evil.

Finally, the story is about us. And where are we in this story? I think we must be with the Magi studying the signs of the times, hoping for a new age. We are on a journey following a star, wondering where it will lead us. Maybe we are at the house elated to be at the end of our quest. Or we are in the house falling down and worshipping the miracle of the child, Christ. That's where I want to be. Part of us is worried about the murderous Herod. Part of us is fleeing by another road, hoping to pass unnoticed. determined not to betray the gift we have been given. Or again, maybe we are Mary and Joseph fleeing south, heading for a foreign land, looking over our shoulder as we go, filled with both fear and hope, and holding tight to that child.

Wherever we find ourselves, God is there. God is there. This is God's story we are in, and God is with us. Christ is with us.

We live in in an unsettling and, frankly, a dangerous time. The Omicron variant is in Lincoln County, we know. The case count has been going up daily. It's unsettling. It's frightening. Meanwhile, our leaders are at war with one another. Of course, that's nothing new, but it seems worse now. New threats to peace among nations are in the news. Nature is in revolt. On and on.

But now, as then, though threats abound, God is with us on our journey. The light of Christ leads us onward. What's more, we journey in good company. We are not alone. We're not alone. We have each other. The journey seems long, very long and wearying. But together, we will follow the star. Bethlehem will appear on the horizon. We will find the house. We will find the child. We will bow down before him and offer our gifts. Have faith. We will get there. Thanks be to God.