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Epiphany/Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 12, 2025

***Matthew 2:1-12***

***In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east 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 magi 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 in the east, 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.***

***Luke 3:15-17, 21-22***

***As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”***

***21******Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”***

Did any of you ever watch a show, hosted by that great American news anchor, Walter Cronkite, called “And You Were There?” It was an educational program that portrayed a newscaster, Walter Cronkite, sharing the news of the day, but the news of the day was a history story. For example, he would go on site and interview Hariett Tubman as she was sneaking through the woods; he would tell about her and her story, and always end by saying “And You Were There.”

I can just see Walter Cronkite telling us that there was amazing news that day, of men who had followed a sign that led them to a baby. Walter Cronkite would take us to an interview by a reporter on the scene, with the magi just after they left King Herod’s place.

“I am on the scene now in Jerusalem, at King Herod’s palace where these men have just left the palace.

I see you’ve just left King Herod’s palace. Why did you come to see the King?”

“We have reason to believe that there has been an important birth, one who is king of the jews. Naturally we came here because this is where kings are. But he’s not here.”

“He’s not here?”

“Evidently not. And it’s strange, the king seemed really worried at first, but then consulted his men and sent us happily on our way, to Bethlehem. He said we should come back after our visit, and let him know where the baby is so he could go pay him homage too.”

2nd magi: “But it felt weird. The king was excited, but cagey. We’re just excited to continue our journey to Bethlehem.”

And then there would be a reporter on the scene in Bethlehem, interviewing the magi again, perhaps just after their epiphany:

“I’m reporting from Bethlehem, where we have just met these magi who have just been in to see the one they’re calling the king of the Jews.

How do you feel?”
“Well, its just indescribable. Just overwhelming joy! He’s just a baby, but we know that this child is born to be the one our prophets have been telling us of. It’s really going to take some time to know what to make of this great news.”

“People have been saying that when the Messiah came he would be the savior of the Jews, but my friends and I are gentiles and we now have seen and recognized him as the messiah! It’s just mind numbing.”

“We just stood there at first. But then we bowed down and offered these gifts. Silly really, gifts for a king, but now we know that this child will be unlike any king we’ve ever heard of.”

“It feels like time is standing still, and rushing forward, at the same time.”

“We’re supposed to go back to King Herod, but oddly, all of us had the same dream last night, telling us to return to our homes by some other road.”

“And there you have heard from the travelers themselves. Reporting from Bethlehem. Back to you Walter.”

Just the words, “in the days of King Herod of Judea” brought to mind the perilous, desperate, bleak and uncertain times surrounding the events of the rest of the entry in the second chapter of Matthew. The first chapter of Luke sets the scene the same way. Nothing else needed to be said.

Both of our texts for today locate their events during such perilous times. Just like the names Erik, Gunnar, Leif and Karl in my Swedish family tree, the name Herod was a popular one. There was an entire dynasty named after the Herod’s: The Herodian Dynasty. King Herod of Judea had three sons, including King Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee. Bible stories of King Herod are often confused with one another because of this. The King Herod of the narratives surrounding the imprisonment and execution of John the Baptist, and the king who participated in the trial of Jesus is the son, Herod. The King Herod of Jesus’ birth narrative here in Matthew, is the father, Herod. Neither one had a good reputation.

Our Luke text today begins, “The people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah.” By the time we arrive at this third chapter of Luke, Herod the Great (father) had died, and the current ruler was Herod, the son. Under this Herod too, life was not good. There was a constant expectation that deliverance from the difficult lives would come when the prophesied Messiah came. Today’s Luke reading comes at the end of the “brood of vipers” text that Craig so brilliantly read for us a few weeks ago. (It was actually kind of scary!) That brood had been read the riot act by John just moments before and wondered if John was the One. But John told them that he baptized with water, but the one who is coming will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. In other words, You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.

*Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”*

I love the picture the Luke version shows us, of Jesus praying. After the drama of the water, Jesus prays, and that is when the heaven was open. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, and God spoke in the first person – You are my Son.

Today’s scriptures reveal the manifestation of Christ to the world. Whether by his manifestation to the gentiles at the visit of the magi, or the presence of the Holy Spirit and affirmation by God at his baptism, both of today’s texts remind us of the global nature of Christ. Christ didn’t come just for a few chosen, or just for the best and brightest, or for the most holy. Christ came that all of us might have life.

Something made the magi stop what they were doing and travel a great distance. In Mark’s gospel it is shepherds in the field who stop what they are doing and travel to Bethlehem. Whether we are magi or shepherds, how will we faithfully follow signs to the holy? What treasures will we lay at the feet of the holy? And what holy dream will we follow, “even if it means disobeying a king and taking the long way home.” (Stamper)

Let us pray,

Bauman, Stephen, Feasting on the Word commentary, Year C, Vol. 1, pp.212-216

Smith, Mitzi, Working Preacher, Jan 12, 2025

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-luke-315-17-21-22-6>

Stamper, Meda, Working Preacher, Jan 6, 2025

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-14>