

January 6, 2013

Isaiah 60: 1-6

This passage from the prophet written during Babylonian exile, is almost certainly the source for Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi bearing gifts for Israel's new born king. Many modern depictions of that event and the carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," also take their basic elements from this passage. As it stands, however, it presents a clear description of God's activity within human history interpreted metaphorically as giving light where darkness has previously prevailed. This, of course, recalls the first act of creation in Genesis 1: the creation of light where there had been only chaos and darkness. If this passage was written from Babylon, as many scholars believe, it could be a reminiscence of dawn over Jerusalem as the sun rises over the Mount of Olives flooding the holy city and its temple with the radiant splendour. As the city awakened, people began flocking toward the sacred places. In the prophet's vision, not only faithful Israelite sons and daughters returned from exile gathered there. With them came people of many nations and even their kings bringing the wealth of their countries from afar as offerings acceptable on God's altar.

¹Get out of bed, Jerusalem!

Wake up. Put your face in the sunlight.

God's bright glory has risen for you.

²The whole earth is wrapped in darkness,

all people sunk in deep darkness,

But God rises on you,

his sunrise glory breaks over you.

³Nations will come to your light,

kings to your sunburst brightness.

⁴Look up! Look around!

Watch as they gather, watch as they approach you:

Your sons coming from great distances,

your daughters carried by their nannies.

⁵When you see them coming you'll smile—big smiles!

Your heart will swell and, yes, burst!

All those people returning by sea for the reunion,

a rich harvest of exiles gathered in from the nations!

⁶And then streams of camel caravans as far as the eye can see,

young camels of nomads in Midian and Ephah,

Pouring in from the south from Sheba,

loaded with gold and frankincense,

preaching the praises of God.

Matthew 2: 1-12

Matthew tells quite a different story about the birth of Jesus than did Luke. It would appear to be original to the author of the gospel himself. The issue with which the early church had wrestled for several decades was the inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian community founded by Jews. This story, could quite possibly be seen as a parable rather than a historical narrative, is Matthew's response to that conflict. Foreigners, as the magi certainly were, came seeking the newborn king of Israel whose signal star they had been following for some time. They could not have been Jews for they asked Herod questions which a Jew would have already known. We have tended to idealize and romanticize the story in so many ways that we have neglected its more obvious meaning. It would appear that Matthew told this story to help his audience draw the conclusion that the prophecies being fulfilled were about foreign nations coming to Jerusalem to worship Israel's God.

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. ²They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

³When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. ⁴Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

⁶It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."

⁷Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. ⁸Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

⁹Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child.

¹⁰They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

¹¹They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

¹²In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Sermon

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day that the Magi are to have finally come to where Christ was born.

We traditionally have envisioned Jesus being born in a wooden stable surrounded by farm animals. In fact it is more likely that this stable in which Jesus was born was actually a cave cut into the limestone hills on which Bethlehem was built. I was reading an account of a visit to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and how the visitor came to a great wall and in that wall was a door so low that one had to stoop to enter; on the other side of the door, on the other side of the wall was the church. Beneath the altar of the church is a cave and on the floor of the cave is a star with the Latin inscription "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." Now this might be the cave/stable or it might not be, we may never truly know, but the fact that one need to almost enter on bended knee reminds us of those Magi entering to celebrate the birth of a new born king. A cave cut into a hillside is not the usual place one would expect a king to be born.

Jesus was born into a world that was anxiously waiting for new king to be born, for a new world to come into being and so we come to epiphany.

According to Wikipedia epiphany is "an experience of sudden and striking realization. Generally the term is used to describe breakthrough scientific, religious or philosophical discoveries, but it can apply in any situation in which an enlightening realization allows a problem or situation to be understood from a new and deeper perspective. Epiphanies are studied by psychologists and other scholars, particularly those attempting to study the process of innovation. Epiphanies are relatively rare occurrences and generally following a process of significant thought about a problem. Often they are triggered by a new and key piece of information, but importantly, a depth of prior knowledge is required to allow the leap of understanding. Famous epiphanies include Archimedes' discovery of a method to determine the density of an object and Isaac Newton's realization that a falling apple and the orbiting moon are both pulled by the same force."

Well that explains it all, doesn't it?

Not really and I wonder about this passage and the idea of epiphany, what do they have to do with each other?

Now one could say that the striking realization, the epiphany, came to those 3 magi who finally found that baby in the manger. Who were these men who travelled this long way? Traditionally Magi were men who were skilled in philosophy, medicine and the natural sciences. They were also those who interpreted dreams. There is a thought that these men could have been members of the priestly caste of

Zoroastrianism, who are known for incorporating the study of stars into their religious practices. Others believe that they might have been the teachers and instructors to the Persian Kings known for their holiness and wisdom. Regardless these individuals had travelled a long way to see this baby in that manger. But our reading this morning says that these 3 had been on a pilgrimage, following that star in the eastern sky signaling the birth, so were they really surprised at what they found that day?

I suppose their epiphany could have come to the Magi in the realization that Herod was not telling the truth in his wish to honour the new born king and the dream that warned them not to return to Herod and therefore they returned to their own country via a different route. Which for these 3, who came from afar to celebrate the birth, could have been enlightenment, the idea that not all were celebrating the birth of this king; that there was some who might be threatened by this birth?

This then leads me to another idea about epiphany. The fear that is shown by Herod, and in turn the whole of Jerusalem, as our reading states, "When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified-and not just Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well." But why would this be considered to be an epiphany, I guess the better question might be why was Herod so scared? Jerusalem was the seat of power in ancient Judea. Herod has spent years making a nice comfortable life for himself, consolidating power and working with the Romans. Yet, here was this supposed new born baby, who was destined to become king and change everything Herod had built. This was probably why most of Jerusalem was scared as well, because their lives would change. Those who had become wealthy and powerful under Herod might lose their power and prestige; all because this new "shepherd ruler" was born in some backwater little town on the edge of the Roman Empire. If we were to continue on with the story we really see the fear of Herod as he resorts to violence and calls for the murder of all the boys 2 and under. An extreme reaction, but paranoia and fear can be harsh taskmasters.

How do we react to those who come to be seen as challenging the comfort of our lives, the status quo? We have seen, all too often, the reactions of those in power to those who would challenge that power. We see it today as Chief Theresa Spence enters day 27 of her hunger strike in Ottawa. We see the power structures closing ranks and not acknowledging the issues. We see the death of a 23 year old Indian student finally catalyzing a challenge to the traditional treatment of women in Indian society. Yet, for all those voices we are finally hearing, how many we not hear because we don't want the comfort of our lives to be upset.

And yet in our Gospel reading we have a story of 3 "others" who have come to inform Herod about the birth of a new king. How many times have we not listened to those "others" in our lives who have tried to tell us about a new way of living, a new way of being?

I received an email on Friday morning that talked about the 10 things that can be harmful for a congregation. Number 7 was "Opting for Comfort Over Risk." We are all guilty of this. It is much easier, less stressful, and simply cozier if we stick to what we like, what makes us comfortable. Risk is, well, risky! It might mean we get hurt or embarrassed or have our ego bruised. But the fact remains, without the challenge of risk, growth is often stunted, at best. A tree grows stronger when it is buffeted by wind and storm. No one ever promised us an easy, cozy life. In fact, Jesus even warns us that we will have trouble. Ignoring such a wise word is foolish. It is best to welcome risk so that we can grow stronger and stand taller.

Who was it that first said, "The Gospel comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable"? The Church should encourage uncomfortable risk-taking, whether it means opening ourselves up to new people, trying new types of ministry, and in general putting God's work before our own comfort.

I believe that epiphany is a time when we need to see ourselves in the light of the one who comes to challenge the king with a new idea of kingship and in turn challenges us today out of the complacency of our lives. A time when we need to see that our lives need to be a testament to the new born baby. We have come through the good feelings of Christmas with that wonderful story of the birth of Christ and the coming of love incarnate into the world. We are now faced with the realities of life, with the anger, jealousy and violence of the world into which Jesus was born. We, today, live in a world of injustice and fear, violence and pain. How do we as Christians live in a world such as this? Do we live our lives in complacency or do we become Magi in the modern world? Do we announce the coming of a new kingdom? Do we challenge those power structures that keep the "others" marginalized? Do we stand with the Theresa Spences of the world and the "Idle No More" demonstrators and call for a new way of living? Dorothy Day, who in the thirties started the Catholic Workers movement which was a nonviolent, pacifist movement that combined direct aid for the poor and homeless with nonviolent direct action on their behalf, made the following statement; "Our problems stem from our acceptance of system of injustice." Yet do we challenge this system, do we work towards a new system, one based on justice and equality?

This is the challenge for us during this season of epiphany. Are willing to be open to those "sudden and striking realizations" that things need to change? Are we willing to act on those epiphanies? We are called with the birth of a child to rethink the world, rethink those power structures for as Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, the author of "*The Gulag Archipelago*" states "In keeping silent about evil, in burying it so deep within us that no sign of it appears on the surface, we are *implanting* it, and it will rise up a thousand fold in the future. When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."

So, in this season of Epiphany let us be open to those moments of sudden realization. Those moments that we become the Magi and call the world to a new way of being; let

us challenge those structures of power that perpetuate injustice, fear and violence in the world today and let us celebrate the birth of the baby, the new king, all those years ago, by bringing about a world of change today. Amen.