

“GIFTS FOR CHALLENGING TIMES”

Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

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Just to be clear, Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth is very different from Luke’s. Matthew knows nothing of the census demanded by Caesar Augustus. He says nothing of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. There is no inn, no shepherds and no angel choirs. What we get instead is a story about wise men from the distant East following a star to pay homage to a now two-year old king of the Jews named Jesus. They find him in his house in Bethlehem, where he seems to have resided since birth. As in Luke’s story he will end up in Nazareth, but by a far more circuitous and dangerous route.

Some find these differences disturbing, but mostly we reconcile them by accepting Luke’s account and seeing the wise men as latecomers. They belong not to the celebration of Christmas in the church year, but to the day of Epiphany, a completely separate festival that looks to Jesus as the “light of the world.” In our household, we are very careful not to move the magi to the manger until January 6th, but consistency suggests that we ought to also remove the shepherds and angels, take down the stable and replace it with a house.

Even more, if we want to open ourselves fully to Matthew’s meaning, we should forget Luke’s version altogether. Here are the facts as Matthew presents them. In chapter one, Mary is found to be “with child” during her engagement to Joseph. Joseph, being a good man and not wanting to subject her to shame, intends to dismiss her quietly. But then, an angel appears to him in a dream telling about the child who is to be named Jesus because “he will save his people from their sins.” Matthew then emphasizes the significance of this by quoting the prophet Isaiah who anticipates and interprets this birth as a sign that God has come among us.

So, we’ve got a crisis occurring on at least three levels: the personal crisis of Mary’s pregnancy by someone other than her betrothed; the more general crisis of the people of God caught up in their own sin; and the problem of a world which God has seemingly abandoned. The personal crisis is resolved with by a messenger from God to Joseph. Jesus, over the course of his life will address the crisis of sin, and his very birth marks an end to God’s abandonment of the world.

Enter now the wise men! They’ve seen a star which tells them that the next “king of the Jews” has been born, so they go to the palace where one would expect to find this child only to discover that Herod has not sired such a child. The councilors are consulted, Bethlehem is identified, and the star reappears to guide the wise men to their final destination where they present their gifts to Jesus and return home having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod.

You can see the difference between the two birth narratives if you ask the question: “Who’s happy about Jesus’ birth?” In Luke, the list includes Elizabeth, Mary, shepherds, and angels followed shortly by Simeon and Anna. Joseph is the only one who might not be so happy, but his reaction is not recorded for us. In Matthew, the only ones we are sure about are the wise men who are strangers in the land and belong to a different faith. The mood in Matthew is decidedly anxious. There are no Jews who rejoice at Jesus’ birth, not even lowly shepherds. We don’t know how Mary feels about it and we might infer that Joseph feels somewhat burdened.

Some years, Christmas is like this. We’re not as excited about the birth of Jesus as we are other years. We’re remembering the loss of a loved one. We get lost in the rush of getting ready. We’re short of cash, so we can’t buy the present that we’d like to. Our health is not so good this year. Or the news of the world is worse than ever.

In our household, by Christmas, we always come around to the Lukan joy, but I think many felt the muted Christmas of Matthew this year. For some it was the election, but there were other things that burdened many of us. The news out of Syria and surrounding countries continues to be bad, creating the worst refugee crisis ever. Israel is back to building settlements in the occupied territory. Many are saying that the possibility of a two state solution is long past. Terrorist attacks are a daily occurrence. Mass shootings continue to disturb us. Hate speech and incidents were on the rise even as we celebrated the birth of our Lord. These are challenging times to live in. It’s hard to believe in the birth of a Savior.

But Matthew’s story is even worse than this. Not only are there those who might find it difficult to believe in a savior, but there are those who actively resist the coming presence of God. We often forget that Herod is a main character in this story and he is not anxious for a new king on the horizon. His efforts to kill the new king will result in the slaughter of innocent children in Bethlehem and force the holy family to become refugees in the land of Egypt. Even after several years away, Bethlehem is not safe for them and they must settle in Nazareth.

We have our Herods still, people who profit from the misfortune of others. We won’t all agree on the details about who belongs in this category, but it’s difficult to argue against the reality that such people exist. Matthew describes a time when joy and hope are hard to come by. And inasmuch as he describes a challenging time, he also describes our time as well.

But like Luke’s story, his is not a tale of despair and woe. Despite the threats and the evils that surround the birth of Jesus, Matthew maintains that a Savior is born and that God has entered our world in order to transform it. And in this story of the visit of the wise men, he describes four gifts for challenging times.

We are familiar with three of them presented by the wise men to the child Jesus: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts signify the offices of prophet, priest and king. The prophet holds up to our faces the mirror of truth, exposing the lies and deceptions that

make for an unjust world. The priest offers words of healing and comfort to the victims of violence and abuse, as well as signs of forgiveness for the sins we commit against others and ourselves. And the king offers a path to right living, a law that defines just and peaceful relationships. Jesus will be all these things for those who come to follow him in his day and in ours. His presence and work offer hope that things need not continue as they have: that love does conquer hate and goodness overcome evil.

We'll talk more about these gifts as we speak in the coming weeks about how the church can address racism, how we can welcome the stranger, and our responsibility for prophetic ministry. But there's a fourth gift in this story that we often overlook, a gift that actually moves the action in a saving direction. When Mary is about to be abandoned, Joseph is given a dream. When the wise men think to return to Herod, they are given a dream. These dreams pointed them in the right direction. They moved Joseph from doing a good thing to doing a better thing. They revealed the truth of Herod's deception to the wise men, so that they would not become complicit in his evil intent.

People have dreams. Sometimes they are about a way forward. Sometimes they are warnings against a misstep. Dreams energize our vision and support our hopes. When we're faced with a dilemma or problem, "sleeping on it" produces a solution. Dreams are gifts made especially for challenging times when the waking imagination fails to see a way through.

I much prefer the good news of great joy that we get in Luke's gospel, but Matthew offers us a story that addresses us in the challenging lives we lead. He presents a Savior who lives in the midst of our needs and worries, who offers strength in the face of evil, compassion in the midst of grief, and hope for the future in the midst of challenging times. Amen.