

“Dare We Take Another Way Home?”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Epiphany

Perhaps you are a family who packs up Christmas soon after December 25. Others are staunchly committed to leaving out the nativity until Epiphany on January 6, particularly if they have roots in the Orthodox Christian tradition. Still others, may just work around shepherds and wise men until the Spring equinox, each weekend thinking, “I really need to put those away,” but deciding it is more important to attend a child’s concert or game, or work at the food pantry. If you do this in 2016, the Spring equinox is just a week before Easter. Even in the church, we put away Christmas after Epiphany. So, this morning, before we walk away from the manger, I’d like us to take a last look at our stories of Jesus’ birth.

One could say, Christmas Eve belongs to Luke’s story of shepherds and angels, fields in Judea and a manger in Bethlehem. Today, Epiphany, belongs to Matthew’s story of wise men and a king, a palace in Jerusalem and a house in Bethlehem. Blending the two stories is natural, though doing so confuses that it was only the magi, not the shepherds, who followed the star.

During Advent, and on Christmas Eve, I noted the first two chapters of Luke have ties to the whole of his Gospel. The same is true for Matthew. It is as if the stories of Jesus’ birth and childhood are overtures, previews of coming attractions, to prepare us for what will follow.

The first two chapters of Luke are an overture uplifting the role and status of women and Jesus’ advocacy for the marginalized poor, represented by the shepherds at the manger. Luke highlights the Holy Spirit at work, beginning with the lives of Zechariah and Elizabeth, and the annunciation and conception of Jesus.

Today, we turn to Matthew’s birth narrative as the overture to his Gospel. It will involve foreigners and royalty, and plots to quell any threat to the empire’s power. It will also link Jesus’ birth to Moses and the Exodus.

Two notes about names may be missed in the birth narratives. In Luke, we heard of Emperor Augustus Caesar, grandnephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar. Augustus is credited with bringing the great Roman Peace, the Pax Romana, in 31 BC. He was originally called Octavian, then renamed Augustus, meaning divine one. Historical documents note this Caesar welcomed being called “the son of God.”

Matthew’s political figure is more localized, a regional king named Herod, a Roman but called their King of the Jews. From the time of his birth to his trial, Jesus will be referred to by others as the King of the Jews, including this morning when the wise men ask Herod where they might find the King of the Jews. Right away, Matthew sets up a conflict about who is the true king.

Finally, before we read our lesson, you may never have considered what you place at the top of your Christmas tree may be indicative of your gospel preference. Matthew’s story puts a star on the top of Christmas trees, signifying the light that guided foreign magi to the birthplace of God’s son. Atop Luke’s is an angel, or perhaps a dove marking the Holy Spirit. I have no clue what gospel would prompt one to put Santa on top of the tree.

Matthew's story is a journey that will stop at King Herod's palace on the way to Bethlehem, but avoid the king on the way home. Let us now hear Matthew's overture in Matthew 2:1-12:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."³ When 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 wise men 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 at its rising, 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.

One of the perplexities of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, is that other than Luke's story of Jesus in the temple at age twelve, the Gospels leave a thirty year gap in Jesus' biography. I mentioned there are stories of Jesus as a child, but they are not in our Bible. In addition, the gospels were written some 60-80 years after these events took place, so it is not heretical to ask if these accounts are fact or story.

So, while we know the birth stories of Jesus well, albeit in a combined nativity set version where Luke's shepherds share stable space with Matthew's magi, we might hesitate if asked by a challenging youth, "Do you really believe it all happened just as Luke and Matthew wrote it?"

As we take a final look at Jesus' birth this morning, I would simply suggest, there is an alternative to a yes or no answer. Without offering a direct "Yes, it is in the Bible so that is what happened," or "No, I don't believe it happened that way," or even the apologetic, "With God anything is possible," we might say, "I find truth in the stories even if I do not believe them to be literally true." This is the idea of parable, a story that tells a truth without the need for proven fact. Of course, Jesus was a prolific parable teller, using fictional stories about agriculture, money, and human behavior, to deliver his teachings – and for followers of Jesus, we find truth in those teachings.

During Advent, and again on Christmas Eve, we looked at Luke's stories as overture, told in the form of parable, to deliver the truth of God's intent in sending Jesus. Again, Luke uplifted the role of women, gave credibility to marginal, poor shepherds, and accorded more power to the Holy Spirit than the Emperor. For that alone, it is quite a subversive story!

Matthew's setting is most obviously different in that God's Messiah is not announced to a field of marginalized sheep keepers, but to those trusted to read the stars, particularly for royalty such as Herod. Thus, royalty would seem to be a theme of Matthew, but only insofar as telling us God is going to deal with those who affect and afflict God's own people.

More than in any other Gospel, in Matthew we read the phrase, "as it is written..." followed by a reference to the Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew's Messiah and his ministry will be the fulfillment of prophetic promise. Even more, the roots of Matthew's Messiah, the savior, the deliverer, can be traced back to the story of Moses in Egypt.

Centuries before Jesus, a new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt, who feared the growth of the Hebrew people, both in numbers and in economy. Harsh rules of forced labor were imposed on the Israelites, but still they flourished. So, an insecure Pharaoh imposed a male infanticide, ordering midwives to throw into the Nile all male children born to Hebrew women. We have no biblical record of the result of this decree, but we do have the story of Moses, who was saved from death by Pharaoh's daughter, raised in Pharaoh's household, and yet nursed by Moses' own mother.

Move to first century Israel, under the Roman occupation of Jewish territory. Matthew tells us King Herod and all of Jerusalem were afraid when the magi brought news "a King of the Jews" had been born. Matthew leaves little to the imagination when we read of Herod's request for the magi to return to him so he too can visit the child. Herod had not gone online to check out the baby gift registry Mary and Joseph had created. When Herod's initial death plot was foiled by God's intervention – a dream that sent the magi home a different way – the king imposed his own decree of infanticide of all Hebrew male children, though historians of that era do not mention any infanticide.

In the verses following today's reading, Joseph receives instruction, also through a dream, to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt. How ironic the country from which Moses led the exodus to freedom, now becomes a sanctuary for the new savior of God's people.

Not by angel announcement, but by dreams, God intervenes and directs the wise men and Joseph away from the threats posed by the empire. First century hearers will recognize the story of Moses in the birth story of Jesus. In the face of first century oppression, Matthew is envisioning the hope that a God who had once caused the Red Sea to engulf the mighty army of Pharaoh in the Red Sea, can and will overcome the Herods and Caesars of their time. Yet, this deliverance will not be by power and might, but by truth.

At Christmas and Epiphany, we delight in two distinct stories, which unite in our wonder of a birth. Both offer overtures of God's relationship with humanity. Luke focuses on the marginalized and powerless. Matthew writes for those suffering persecution and oppression. Luke threads the power of the Holy Spirit into the lives of mortals. Matthew opens the curtain on a royal confrontation, witnessing to a God who can thwart the decrees of kings to bring fulfillments of hope. Both are our stories, and whether believed to be fact or parable, they contain truth for us.

In Luke, God's desire for equality among rich and poor, classy and classless, women and men is set forth in the overture of a Gospel promoting equality. Yet then, as now, there is still poverty, classism, racism and sexism. The overture we hear in the Christmas story, and the Gospel we will hear during this lectionary year become our invitations to take part in the story.

In Matthew, the overture includes those mysterious kings from the East, wise men, magi, who are able to charm Herod enough to call in the Jewish priests to reveal Bethlehem as the place of the new king's birth. Yet, even these secular magi who received the favor of Herod, are willing to disobey the king's command to return and reveal the birthplace when God directs them in a dream not to do so. Matthew sets before us the understanding God's desires can be revealed in the ways of dreams and visions that thwart the will and way of power. It becomes our challenge to be aware of when we are called to stand against, and speak truth to power.

To be clear, my impression of being willing to speak truth to empires, to dare to take another way home is not about standing up for our own rights or privileges, or even to stand against tax increases. Those all might be well and good, but there is a "what's in it for me" aspect to such speech, even if we portray it as being for all people. To dare to take another way home involves speaking truth in difficult situations, advocating for the rights of a co-worker or fellow student when it could cost us status or cause our embarrassment. To dare to take another way home is to say, "No," to something we can afford because we know it is something we do not need. There is no perceived benefit for the wise men to defy Herod's request to let him know the location of Jesus' birth. The magi dare to go home another way at their personal peril, but do so protect the marginalized, those favored by God.

Our two birth stories become one for us, not in their consistency of fact, but in the truth God reveals through both. So, yes, let the powerless shepherds and the regal magi share a place in the nativity scene. Shepherds and magi, together worshipping the Son of God who was not Augustus Caesar, and the King of the Jews who was not Herod.

Shepherds: scared by angels in the night, but moved to travel and be the first witnesses at Jesus' manger, then go off to tell all who would hear of the Good News they had seen.

Wise men: willing to follow a star and then a dream, risking a king's wrath, who was bent on inflicting death in the face of new life. The magi will not tell the Good News to Herod, but go home another way to reveal God's light to the nations.

So, let us leave the manger with joy and daring, moving from overture to action, in delight of God's good news that Jesus Christ is born.