

Epiphanies
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

He was a visitor - from the east. I drove up in my van just before 9am, I know because the *Car Talk* guys were just signing off. As I came into the parking lot there was a man, a smile on his face, just meandering around the corner.

Oh no, I thought, not again.
I have work to do and he is going to ask me for money.
He is going to ask me for food.
He is going to ask for a night's lodging in a motel.
And then I am going to feel bad all day
about my refusal to help him
or if I do help him I am going to feel like
I have been conned into giving away more money.

I get out of the van to talk with him. He began:

*"I am Pentecostal, I believe in Jesus.
The devil has been after me the past few weeks.
Now I am better. I come here to see the church and to pray."*

"Do you know Pastor Cruz? Do you go to this church?" I ask.

*"I came here last week and met Jose
and he invited me to come to this church but I have a church.
I just like to come here and pray, see this church.
Can you do me a favor. Can you pray for me?"*

So we pray for protection from evil, for Jesus to be near him, for the Holy Spirit to be with him. He looks again at the church building and says
"I like this area, it is beautiful around here."

I ask if he lives nearby.
*"I live near Langley Park but I like to walk over here.
I like to walk. I like to pray here."*

We say goodbye and he is gone, walking back toward the east
and I am left me looking at the plain brick building
wondering what he sees in it.

I understand the draw to church buildings. As a college student traveling in Europe, I went to cathedrals, little churches, anywhere that looked like it had some holy history, to sit and pray.

It did give me comfort to sit on those cold benches, on the cold stone floors and breathe in and breathe out, to breathe in the Spirit, and on the exhale to imagine the Spirit of God spreading through my whole body.

I was not dealing with the devil, but there were some strong forces at work, and I had made some poor choices. And so at each new town I would seek out a church and sit and breathe and pray.

Our text this morning is one that is so familiar we hardly have to read it. We watch it in the pageant; we sing songs about it. And yet recently I realized this story is not as we have always told it.

In Genesis we have two creation stories. Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. They come from two different traditions with two different understandings of how and why God created the world. While the details differ, our concern is with the theological understandings about God. We have two creation stories because one story cannot capture the fullness of who God is, of who God is in relation to human beings. For those who take the stories literally two creation accounts may be troubling. But we can all admit that God is bigger than one story, more tremendous than one metaphor.

Imagine my surprise and excitement then this week when I realized in a new way that we not only have two creation stories in Genesis, we have two different birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. We know this.

But really,

these are two very different stories. There is hardly anything in them that is the same - aside from Mary, Joseph, Jesus and an angel.

Luke and Matthew have different genealogies.

Luke features Mary prominently and hardly mentions Joseph.

In Matthew, Joseph's side of the story is told

and it is he who receives the visits from the angel, not Mary.

Luke has shepherds,

Matthew has kings.

We know this.

But Luke is about a trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth.

Matthew has no travel, at least for Joseph and Mary.

In Matthew they stay at home and have a baby in the house.

And what's more, there were not **three kings**.

It doesn't say how many there were
and they aren't even kings!
It just says there were wise ones, astrologers, that came from the East.

I am sorry if this ruins Christmas and epiphany for you. I don't mean to dash your faith against a stone. I mention it because it is an epiphany for me. Jesus' birth is so wonderful that one way of telling the story cannot contain it all.

In Luke, Jesus was born and he came to save his people.

But in Matthew, Jesus was born and he came to save *even those who were not his people*.

So where do the kings come in?

The wise ones from the East have become kings because in Psalm 72 we read:

*May his foes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust.
May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.*

The astrologers become kings because in Isaiah 60 we read:

*Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

By tradition we have put all these things together:

Psalm 72, Isaiah 60, Matthew 2 and we have three kings.

Matthew says they brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh; it pretty much matches what Isaiah and the Psalmist say. But Matthew does not say they were kings. They were something even more mysterious; they were pagan. They were star followers, astrologers. They were not Jewish; they were from outside the Roman Empire. They were from Persia.

The wise ones had studied the heavens and they knew that a star like this announces the birth of a king.

A star shining over the land of the Jews must mean a new king of the Jews.

So they traveled to Jerusalem, the seat of power where certainly there would be knowledge of a new king.

They went to the local ruler, Herod, to get directions.

Herod in all his paranoia was afraid of what they were talking about and afraid of what they might find.

The people of Jerusalem were afraid too.

They had made a kind of peace with the Roman occupation.

Their people had experienced war and exile and

they were not in any hurry for some revolutionary to come and goof up what small peace they had.

So when Herod asks the chief priests and scribes

about this King of the Jews that the astrologers are after they go back to the scripture.

“No, it is not Jerusalem, it is Bethlehem. It says right here in Micah 5 that the saving one will come out of Bethlehem.”

So they get back on those camels (from Isaiah 60) and go 9 more miles to Bethlehem. The star seems to move, guiding them and then it stops, right over the house where Mary and Joseph live. And they knock on the door.

I can imagine that Mary was not all that eager to let these strangers into her home. They probably looked like they had traveled for months. But they are let into the house, and the astrologers from another land kneel in front of the child and give him gifts.

The gifts seem strange to us but perhaps for that time and place they were not out of the ordinary.

Incense – to cleanse the air and cover up any unwanted odors,
gold –handy any time, any place,
and myrrh - a healing oil.

Commentators often say these gifts are a foreshadowing of what will become of Jesus. Myrrh, in particular, is an oil that is used to prepare bodies for burial. It gives the readers of Matthew an early glimpse into what is in store for this baby Jesus.

Afterward the easterners find a place to rest and one of them has a dream: a dream to remember. Do not go back to Herod; do not tell him what you have seen. Go home another way. Upon waking, they do go home by another route and disappear from the text.

This is Matthew’s story. He gives a clear message that Jesus came not only for his people. When Jesus was born even those from as far away as Persia came to honor him and recognize his power and importance.

The Magi themselves foreshadow later verses in Matthew.

In chapter 28, after his resurrection, Jesus tells his followers to “go into all the world” making disciples.

At his birth, in the visit of the magi, it is as if “all the world” has come to him.

When the compilers of the canon were gathering gospels I wonder if they saw these two different stories of Jesus’ birth and realized how important they both are. Luke and Matthew both give us essential truths about who Jesus is. His life was a life lived for God and to God. That is a gift to all people everywhere, not just the chosen people. A Life lived for God transcends time, genes and mile markers. Jesus’ life is so remarkable that we can hardly capture its truth in one birth story; there must be two. And besides if we have two creation stories and Jesus is the new creation, the new Adam, why not have two birth stories about this new creation? Just because there are two doesn’t make them any less true.

I still puzzle at the visitor from the East. Why does he walk 4 miles on busy highway,

passing many churches along the way to come to our church and pray?

What does he see?

What does he experience when he is here, outside?

After he left, I kept getting up, to look out the window.

What could he see in this place?

Bricks, that’s what you can see, bricks.

The building is solid, it is strong.

If you are running from the devil, you want a strong church like this one.

Maybe that is what he sees - a small, solid sanctuary.

It is has become a kind of holy marker for him of where God is in the world.

In Matthew’s story the three astrologers disappear.

We have no idea what happens to them.

We don’t know if they make it make safely home,

if they eventually become followers of this baby Jesus.

We have no further information.

It is as if they are in the story only as an illustration

to tell us something about Jesus.

That hardly seems fair.

What is even more unfair is that I use this story

of the man I met in the church parking lot as an illustration.

Who is he? Did he return home safely?

Will he be healed by his faith?

This is part of the truth that we receive
from Genesis in the creation stories
and from the gospel birth narratives.

The truth is:
the story is about God and the way God works in the world.

Most of us don't even make the footnotes.
But our role is to be part of that story as best we can,
by being aware of God's work in the world
and by participating in that work.

The magi saw and followed the star;
they made their way into the story of God's work in the world.

May we search for the guiding stars that point to God's work.

May we too become characters in the story of God's work in the world.