

“WHEN CHRISTMAS IS OVER”

Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 2:1-12

January 3, 2021

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I walk around the house looking at the magi from the various nativity sets. Some are clearly dressed as princes or kings, others less ornate, but still men of influence. All have them bearing the gifts they bring for the new-born king of the Jews. They are either astrologers or very familiar with the practice. They have seen in the night sky the star signifying the birth of a king.

We see in this story our own spiritual journeys: the star we follow and the gifts we bring. Perhaps we see in the wise men persons more reflective of ourselves than the shepherds. Many of us are people with some means, some education, and some influence.

I've always enjoyed this story. Having an early growth spurt meant I got to play one of the wise men in the children's Christmas pageants. Wearing the fancy robes, crown on the head, and carrying the ornate box. This is a fond memory.

As I think about those plays, I am noticing that something is missing from them. I don't recall that we stopped in Jerusalem, that we had an audience with Herod, the current "King of the Jews." You'll notice that Herod is also absent from the hymns we are singing today as well. It's not hard to imagine why he is left out. He just doesn't fit the mood we are trying to create.

But Herod is not just a sidebar that can be ignored. The magi did not make a spiritual journey. It was real and it took them to Palestine, to the city of Jerusalem, to the seat of government in Herod's palace, before it took them to Bethlehem. It was important to Matthew for his audience to understand that the government perceived Jesus as a threat. This is part of the context of his birth. The rest of chapter two tells the story of Herod sending troops to Bethlehem to murder innocent children. Understandably we hardly ever talk about this.

I'm not suggesting that we take our focus away from this scene where the magi present gifts to Jesus, but we should see in their prostrating themselves before the child and giving him gifts, that they are acknowledging Jesus as a king. Mostly, we are fine with this, but I suspect that much of our comfort comes from setting this in the context of the British constitutional monarchy where the monarch explicitly stays out of the politics.

But is this the sort of king that the magi are acknowledging? Is this the sort of king that Matthew is talking about? As the story moves along, it turns out that Jesus was not the sort of king that anyone had imagined. And he is not the sort of king that many Christians today imagine.

The gospels take their cue from the prophet Isaiah. When we come to Lent we will discover the sort of king who suffers for the sake of his people. We will experience the depth of this king's love, but at Christmas we recall what the prophet said about the messiah being a "Mighty God, a wonderful Counselor, the everlasting Father, and the prince of Peace." We see one upon whose shoulders "the government will rest."

The gospels make clear that Jesus was not going to be about overthrowing the government, but they also make clear that he cared about and addressed real life needs. When he said blessed are those who mourn, he was offering comfort to the parents of those in Bethlehem who had lost children at the hands of Herod's soldiers. He was about healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation, but he also spoke against the complicity of the religious leadership in the oppression of the poor. He was about loving God, but he was also about loving one's neighbor and welcoming the stranger.

Epiphany is about the revelation of the light of God to the nations. In the magi we see that God's concern extends beyond the Jewish community. In Herod we are reminded that governments have power over life and death. And this should matter to Christians. The magi had to return home by another path, but that's not true for us.

When we rise to our feet, we're already home. We're not vassals to an oppressive empire, but citizens and disciples. I have little interest in partisan politics, but I believe strongly that faith should inform our political behavior. This is not mixing politics and religion, it is recognizing that faith is lived out in a certain context. It means we don't sit idly by while soldiers slaughter innocents. We don't have to just accept that some people get to live in comfortable homes while others lose the roof over their heads. Equity matters to us. We think about justice.

We're not the magi, but we have power and influence like them. This story challenges us to think about what we're going to do when we rise to our feet. What are we going to do when Christmas is over, when we're no longer mesmerized by the infant in the manger, the child in Bethlehem? What are we going to do when we're done marveling over this event of Emmanuel, God-with-us? What are we going to do with the gifts we brought to the manger, with the gifts that God returns to us?

It's a dangerous world, but we are not alone. We should engage the world as our intention statement says. We must use the gifts we have in the places we are to share God's light with the world in need. We won't all do this in the same way. Some will volunteer at food pantries. Some will work at protests. Some will advocate with congress on behalf the hungry. Some will take up vocations that heal the sick or mend the mind or tend the broken. Some will raise awareness and some will petition the government.

When this child grows up and begins his ministry, he will declare that the kingdom of God is at hand. When that day comes, will we still be following that star? Will we present our gifts to be blessed and used by him in this life, in this time, in this place, in whatever way God calls? Amen.