

A Word to the Wise

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Epiphany Sunday (C)
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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas is dangerous. Don't let the gentle creche displays fool you into thinking Christmas is safe, because it's not. Christmas may be a ray of hope for Mary the peasant girl, for the shepherds out in the fields, and for foreign wanderers bearing gifts, but for all these reasons Christmas is also a thumb in the eye of tyrants, a shaking of their world to its very foundations. Christmas is *dangerous!*

The holy family may look peaceful in the stable, but their peace is short-lived. Soon they will be fleeing for their very lives, becoming refugees and strangers in the land of Egypt. How still we see the little town of Bethlehem lying on Christmas night, the silent stars passing over its deep and dreamless sleep, but how quickly the heavenly peace of Bethlehem is pierced with the cries of anguished mothers as Herod pays homage to the Christ child in the only way he knows how: with terror and violence. Make no mistake... God coming to dwell with us, to abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel is necessary for the salvation of the world. But it isn't safe. It isn't peaceful. It's dangerous!

Our gospel lesson this morning shows two different ways of responding to the news that Jesus is born. One way means resisting the change and challenge of Jesus' birth. It means staying where we are, trying to maintain our old way of doing things. But there is another way to receive the news. This way involves leaving the safety of home. It involves generosity and sacrifice. It opens our eyes to the clash between the ways of the powerful and God's ways, and it leaves us no choice but to return by another road.

When King Herod heard about visitors from the east asking for the child born king of the Jews, "he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). He turned to study the scriptures, not to understand and prepare himself for the Messiah, but to try to subvert and sabotage God's unfolding plan. And you can hear the edge, the chilliness in his voice, as he tells the wise men to bring him word of the baby Jesus' whereabouts, "so that I may also go and pay him homage." Herod was a tyrant and a thug, but he got one thing right: Christmas is dangerous. He knew that his hold on power was tenuous. He knew that his actions as a ruler could not withstand God's scrutiny, God's judgment, and if God really were sending a new king with a divine blessing, it could only be bad news for Herod.

It didn't have to be that way. What if Herod had left his palace and his guards, becoming the fourth king to follow the star to Bethlehem? What if he had left behind the privileges and powers that gave him a false sense of safety and invulnerability? What if, in weakness and humility, he too had knelt down and paid homage—for real—to the infant Jesus? It's difficult to imagine, because that's not who Herod was, but it's not as though he didn't have a choice. Confronted with the challenge and opportunity to change his life, to align himself with God's purposes, Herod was afraid, and so he held back and lashed out.

Contrast Herod, though, with the wise men. The wise men didn't know the God of Israel from their left elbow. They studied the stars, and they saw there a message written in a language they could understand that intrigued them and, more than that, compelled them to leave their home, their kindred, their country. We have this image of three wise men mounted on camels, all alone in the desert, and I find it hard to believe they wouldn't have brought at least some form of protection from bandits, but whatever they had would hardly have been a guarantee of safety so far away from anyone who owed them loyalty and respect. Jesus, the Eternal Word of God, made himself weak and vulnerable by being born as a tiny baby to a poor family far from home. In a similar way, the wise men left their home, took a risk, and made themselves vulnerable in order to meet him. There's something about Christmas, about the coming of Jesus in the person of a small and weak little child, that calls forth vulnerability and risk in those who want to see it for themselves. It calls forth generosity—a surrender not only of safety, but also time and treasures. Whatever lies at the end of their journey, the wise men are wise enough to know this: whatever they find, they will not—cannot possibly be—the same as they were before. Because Christmas is dangerous.

And in the end, they did know God, the God of the Jews, didn't they? Their meeting with the Christ child brought joy, but also a new openness to relationship with God. Before, they could hear God speaking to them only indirectly—through the stars, through the scribes who interpreted the Jewish scriptures—but now they could hear God speaking directly into their minds through their dreams. And God opened their eyes to see Herod for who he was—a fearful tyrant, projecting strength but, on the inside, terrified of this tiny baby. God sent them home by another road, unwilling to collaborate with Herod, now that they had glimpsed his true nature. And they no longer needed the stars to guide their journey, because they now knew the true and living God.

Christmas is dangerous. Jesus' coming into our world shakes up our assumptions, our values, our habits, and our comfort with our life as it is, however compromised and imperfect.

Maybe it's getting more stuff for the sake of the stuff. Maybe it's putting our faith and heartache into a relationship that, wonderful as it is, just isn't going to save us. I spent some time once with an older adult who was reflecting on what used to be important to her. She told me that she used to clean a different set of curtains each day of the week, so that they were always fresh and clean. She said, "I've learned something since then—that stuff's just not worth worrying about." We've all got stuff, whether we know it or not, that occupies our thoughts and our time, that really isn't worth worrying about. The good news in the story of the wise men is that God can use these things. The stars don't guide our lives—God does. But God guides the stars, too, and if following the stars can bring wise men to Jesus, then God can use our misguided paths to bring us to Jesus.

But once God brings you to Jesus, you can't go back by the same road. Jesus came to kick off God's plan to gather up the whole world in a loving embrace that transforms and purifies, and once we've been led to see him, we can't go back the way we came. We're part of the plan. Wise men set aside their star charts, and wise Christians set aside their stuff, whatever it is, to worship the boy who makes it all unnecessary. The wise men offered Jesus their gifts, but they were the ones who received even more. Every blessing our work and worry could never procure for us, God freely gives to us—forgiveness, healing, wisdom, and the life that is really life. Everything else was never worth having in the first place.

As we enter a new year, in the wake of Christmas, there are a lot of things that

rightly occupy our worries, and also a lot of baggage we could stand to let go of. All of us, I imagine, want to see an end to this terrible pandemic, as we come up on the two-year anniversary of its arrival. I've found, though, that this time has helped bring into sharper focus what matters—health and family above much of the other stuff. Our experiences change us, don't they?

What is the other stuff you're carrying? What things had you placed your trust and hope in, like the wise men's stars, that simply can't bear up under the weight of these expectations? Christmas is nothing if not dangerous. God is calling us to walk another road, to let go of the signs that used to guide us and to open our ears and our imaginations to a new call from God, a call that makes us wiser men and women, as God works through us to gather up all people to God's self.

To Jesus, the Bright Morning Star, the sign of God's new day, be all glory, honor, and authority with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.