

Message for January 10, 2021**Epiphany 2 – Gifts and Gratitude of the Magi****Isaiah 60.1-6 and Matthew 2.1-12**

“I’d like to cancel my subscription to 2021. I’ve experienced the 7 day trial and I’m not interested.”

To think, just a week ago we were thinking/hoping that maybe, just maybe, 2021 would be different... I think most of us knew it would not be. But, still, we had hoped.

This made me think of the road to Emmaus. When Jesus comes alongside the disciples, in the week after his death. He asks them what they are talking about and they tell him all that has happened in the past week. The joy and hope of the entry into Jerusalem, the palm parade. The controversy in the temple, the ways that Jesus was so very countercultural, how he upset those in power. Enough so, that he was arrested, tried and crucified. But still, they say, but still... we had hoped...

We had hoped.

We had hoped to spend time with family and friends over the holidays.

We had hoped that the lockdown would end sooner.

We had hoped that 2021 would be different.

Isaiah tells us that it will be different.

That we are to rise up.

Our time, our “light” has come. The glory of the Lord will be upon us.

It will feel foggy, clouded, stormy, but the brightness of God will break through the storm clouds, burn away the fog. Whole peoples will turn their attention to what God is doing. People with wisdom, curiosity, compassion will gather. There will be diversity, abundance and inclusion. Proclamations of praise. Worship.

Wise ones have come to do just that.

Isaiah has spent all of Advent telling us what is to come.

That there is reason to hope.

It foreshadows this moment.

Folks from afar coming together in worship.

Peoples of all backgrounds in diversity and unity. Abundance shared.

Gratitude and gifts of gold, and frankincense. This is seen as the prophecy for what we know as Epiphany.

Also known as the twelfth day of Christmas, Epiphany was on Wednesday. It is a celebration of Christ as the Saviour of many, the recognition that God's love and grace are available to all.

Epiphany is the time when we celebrate the manifestation of Christ to the wider world, including those outside of the Jewish faith, as represented by the Magi.

I had thought that we would leave it be for this year. We usually mark it on the first or second Sunday after Christmas, and I was away, so it seemed like perhaps we would move on this year. But just like how we needed to lean into Advent and then Christmas, the world around us showed us just how much Epiphany still matters.

After Jesus' birth - which happened in Bethlehem of Judea, during the reign of King Herod - astrologers from the East arrived in Jerusalem and asked "where is the newborn ruler of Judea?"

In less than two verses, Matthew has set the stage, the context for the story, but also the conflict. King Herod, propped up by the Roman Empire and ruling by intimidation and violence, and the one who would challenge such power and authority. Amy Jill-Levine points out that with just that one question, the Magi have, albeit unknowingly, denied Herod's kingship.

This would not have gone well. Herod was notoriously temperamental and fearful, incredibly insecure and paranoid of any challenge to his power. His rise to power began with his father's ties to Julius Caesar, he was also aligned with the military leader Mark Anthony before switching allegiance to Caesar Augustus in order to stay on Rome's good

side. This guy was a major political player. He had friends in high places, and was very ambitious, undertaking daring coups, and large projects - the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, a harbour, the initial financial support for the Olympic Games.

But Herod was vicious: he killed his own sons, whom he suspected of plotting against him, he killed his wife, Mariamne, as well as her mother and brother. According to Josephus, the first century Jewish historian: Herod realized that the people he ruled hated him. For any number of reasons, really. It could have been the taxes, that he replaced the high priest in the temple, just his rule of fear.... Take your pick, really.

Therefore as he was dying, he ordered that “the whole nation should be put into mourning, and indeed made desolate of their dearest kindred, when he gave the order that one out of every family should be slain.”¹

It didn't happen, but it gives you an idea of what kind of guy he was.

Nadia Bolz-Weber sums him up as a guy who was so afraid of losing power that he put out a hit on a toddler.

It's absurd, and yet...

When we hear that “*Herod became greatly disturbed, as did all of Jerusalem,*” we get it. If Herod isn't happy, no one is. Who knows what he will do, how he will lash out, who might suffer in all the chaos that he causes.

We have these worries too. What will happen when those who have been in power feel it slipping away? How will we effect real change when there are so many obstacles in the way? Do we have the stamina to challenge unjust authority and unequal systems?

Oddly enough, even though Herod is set in direct contrast to the one who is “born to be king” he has an important role in finding Jesus. Despite, or because of, or through his fear, Herod calls his advisors together, and authorizes the inquiry into Scripture that will reveal the birth in Bethlehem as the fulfillment of prophecy. Then, he calls on the

¹ The Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent, by Amy-Jill Levine, p. 25

Magi in secret. This is an important note because what is done in this time a place is done in public, because only those who are dishonorable would have something to hide. Herod is not acting in good faith.

“Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report back to me so that I too may go and honour him.”

The Magi go. They follow the star. They are overjoyed at finding the right place. They see the child, with his mother, Mary, and they express their gratitude with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition and our theology tells us that together all of these gifts honoured all aspects of the Christ child. Gold was a gift for royalty, acknowledging that Jesus was of a Royal line. Frankincense was an expensive incense that was burned as a part of worship in the Temple. It was what was offered to God, so this signifies Jesus' divinity. Myrrh was an expensive oil used for perfume. According to this explanation, myrrh was most commonly used among wealthy Jews as an anointing oil for the dead. Thus, the myrrh is seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and a reminder of his mortality.

They presented their most precious possessions to the one in whom they saw the greatest potential. The One who would be one of us - human - vulnerable and compassionate. The One would point the way to the Holy - showing us all the kind of relationship that God desires with us. The One who would lead a different way, with grace rather than fear.

Then they too, follow a different way. The Magi are warned in a dream of Herod's true intentions. So they went back to their country by another route. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that Matthew is hinting at something more. The Greek for “route” is *hodos* (as in the term odometer). She notes that those who gathered in the name of Jesus were rarely called Christians. That as a term isn't really in the Gospels or Epistles at all. They were called “followers of the way” (*hodos*). In this way, the Magi become some of the first evangelists.

We would like to find a different way forward into 2021.

Our humanity, our love, our vulnerability, it is what will help us find the way. That which we consider most precious, our gifts and gratitude, they are meant to be shared.

The time has come to be curious about what could be.

To be hopeful about how things should be.

To be purposeful about making them so.

Let us go home by a different way.

May it be so. Amen.