

“Why is the king frightened?”
Isaiah 60:1-6 **Matthew 2:1-12**

I am delighted that our Christmas decorations are still in place, and I hope that you have not tired of singing songs of Christmas. I can appreciate the desire to get things put away. Part of the grace of giving a party or of hosting a meal is to clean up afterwards and to put things away. It is an acquired taste, I admit, but I still believe there is a grace to it. But even with all the wonderful festivities of this season, there is so much to enjoy and savor. There is also a message about the Messiah that goes beyond all seasons. It is the message.

The message is one of great JOY. Those of you with young children still at home have a fresh experience of the anticipation of joy upon waking up on Christmas morning. That quality of JOY is central to the good news of Christ being born among us. This is not just a time of just simply enjoying the time to be with friends and family but the message of Christmas is that God actually enjoys the company of human beings, and God’s love for being with us is not just limited to a few festive holidays a year. God actually loves the world and God’s action and desire is to be not just friendly with us but more intimate to us than we can ever imagine.

This intimacy not only brings with it great joy, but for us to experience this presence also brings a great disorientation as well. The baby Jesus is not just a source of sentimental amusement or a personality that God has provided to fill up the empty places in our lives. Jesus is living and eternal God in full human form. The presence of God is the center of all being, and God’s presence has the disorienting and disconcerting attribute of displacing everything else we try to put in its place. Even with Christmas, there is the sense that we need for life to return to normal.

The poet W H Auden reveals our honesty in his poem “For the Time Being ...” He writes, “Well, so that is that ... we’ve gotten through once again, perhaps in spite of ourselves ...” but it’s over now. Once again as in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed to do more than entertain it as an agreeable possibility. So, its back to the old world we left behind just for a bit on Christmas Eve, and perhaps that makes us weary. And yet the Vision will not entirely go away. We almost wish it would.” At the end of the poem Auden concludes with these lines, “To those who have seen the child, however dimly, however incredulously, the time being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.”

I have often found it difficult to find a sermon in the story of the wise men as Matthew tells it, but this week in getting the story in some sense as a part of me I find the challenge is to preach only one sermon. So many questions are lurking, so many observations are to be made. For every question we have of the story there is another more penetrating question that the story has for us. For every

observation I can make I sense the story peering back at us questioning and challenging the way we live.

For example, I learned that Bethlehem is actually closer to Jerusalem than Palmetto is to Sarasota, so how could the wise men be led by a star going before them and then how could that star stop? What would that actually look like? I believe that Matthew is very spiritually intentional in this story.

Another observation: King Herod is very astute in his questions. Kings don't stay in power by being sluggish. He has listened carefully when the wise men ask for the child who was "born king." Even heirs to the throne are "born to be king". Something unusual is going on here. He determines the place of the birth from the priests and scribes, and he discovers the time of the birth from the wise men. In one sense he knows as much as the wise men, yet Matthew is very specific, that it is only the wise men that are led by the star. What kind of star is this?

How does a star stop over a house? I believe that this is much more personal and much more cosmic than an astronomical conundrum. Then what about the tragic consequences of this story? The wise men had very specific instructions from Herod to return to him, and based on a dream, as if Herod's motivations weren't already clear enough, they chose not to engage with him and departed another way to home. The direct result of this was that Herod ordered all the young male children in Bethlehem to be killed. Think about it. If the wise men had just done as Herod had told them all those other children would have been saved and only one little boy would have lost his life.

That question does not make us comfortable. It has a way of displacing attitudes and perceptions that we take for granted, but Matthew does not flinch from this dimension of grace. It is a characteristic of the kingdom of God that was both proclaimed and embodied by Jesus Christ, born not to Lord it over us but to shepherd his people.

I believe the Holy Spirit can use God's word to speak to us to lead us to a place where we can have consent to his presence working within us as individuals and as a community of faith. So many questions are asked in so many ways. Herod got all of the answers he was looking for and still didn't find the child. Perhaps it's not about getting the answers to all of our questions. Perhaps it is more about seeking a ruthless honesty about our motivations.

Rather than trying to figure out how a star can actually lead someone down a road for twelve miles and then stop, we could risk the vulnerability of admitting that by ourselves we are lost and will not know where we are until we stop, regularly, consistently, and with a fidelity that is more true than the whims of our appetites.

King Herod is a real problem. We know a lot, perhaps too much about King Herod. He was totally ruthless, but I am gaining respect for the reality that the wise men chose not to outsmart or outwit Herod at all. They simply left. The nativity may have happened in the time of King Herod. History tells us that there were several King Herods during that era, but I do not believe that we need to be a historian to identify Herod. The closer we get to the child the more our own anxieties are revealed. I believe that when we have the courage to look into the window of our hearts, we all have King Herods in power. Most of the time we are quite adept at maintaining a placid sense of control and autonomy, but then there are other times, trying times. And there are circumstances that even King Herod cannot control.

We have a quite involved prayer list on the back page of our bulletin. Sometimes it is a bit much to try to keep track of everyone, but every name listed there is there because of a specific request and a specific need and a lot of love. I want to highlight one this morning, A J Weyant, the 16 month old grandson of Roger and Laura Garn. AJ has his own web site. His mother's name is Hope and I want to read from her latest post. It just seems to fit here:

"It's hard to believe the year is over. I was happy to say goodbye to 2007. It definitely wasn't the year we had planned...a year ago never would I have believed our sweet baby would have cancer. A year ago we never thought we would have to see our child endure the surgeries, the tests, the chemo and have to face the battle of his life at the age of one. A year ago, we never expected that everything we knew as normal would change within a 10 minute discussion with a doctor. But it is what it is. One of my New Years Resolutions is acceptance. Instead of constantly wishing everything would go back to normal and that AJ was well again (which I constantly do), I am going to accept the cards that have been dealt and deal with it the best way possible. Not really sure how to do this, but will try my best.

While we are on the subject of New Years Resolutions, another one of mine is to be thankful, no matter how crappy of a day it is. Because of you, we know we can get through this journey and we will. We are so THANKFUL! We are thankful that everyday we get to wake up and hug AJ, we are thankful for the doctors and nurses caring for him, we are thankful for McDonalds nuggets and fries. I realize God has a plan for everything and while I don't understand the reason for this one right now, I'm grateful that it has made me stop and appreciate the important things in life."

I have nothing to add to those words of wisdom. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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