

“Stars, Secrets and Signs”

Pastor Barbara Edema

Sunday, January 6, 2016 (Epiphany)

Mathew 2:1-12

I wrote a story for today's sermon. Skip the background, if you wish. Go to the story. Just find the star...and hold it in your heart.

Background:

(This gospel passage has every requirement for a great book, play or movie. The characters are distinct. The plot is ideal. The ending has a twist.

We begin with strangers from a faraway country seeking a foreign Messiah by following a guiding star.

A wicked king full of narcissism, insecurity and paranoia. Surrounding the king is group of clergy who bow and scrape and tell the king the truth with trepidation and fear. It was probably better to tell him what he wanted to hear.

There is a baby in a small village not six miles from the crazy king.

The story has intrigue, action, warmth, secrets and threats. It is a story of stars and fears and hope and dreams.

Epiphany means manifestation. The Manifestation of Jesus Christ. Epiphany is always January 6, the day after the twelve days of Christmas – which are December 25-January 5. Epiphany is the season of light! It is a happy day! It is a day of celebration. Christmas gets the spotlight, but Epiphany also shines!

Three stories make up the beginning of the season of Epiphany: The story of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus and the Wedding at Cana. Jesus is manifested to Gentiles, to Jews, to all people. As the season continues, Jesus also continues to reveal himself to those he encounters as he calls his disciples, heals the sick, deals with the Pharisees, and finally the last Sunday of Epiphany is The Transfiguration. And Jesus Christ with his disciples hears the voice of God. Again.

But back to our story today. The facts are debatable. We don't have all the answers. We don't know how many Magi there were, only the number of gifts. There is no mention of Joseph, but we imagine he was around. The star led them to the baby but did not lead them home.

Herod was a paranoid, reckless ruler. He had five wives. He taxed the Jews to build palaces for himself. He killed his own family members, one of his wives and two of his sons. He slaughtered little boys in order to make sure there was no new king of the Jews.

Other members of this “cast” are a group of curious strangers who travel east, miles and miles and miles. It is believed they came from an area in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Yemen. It's likely they were Zoroastrian astrologers. They liked stars.)

Here is my take on this whole wonderful, frightening, precious story:

The Story

Wise ones from the east, let's say Yemen, saw a star. They liked stars, but this one was spectacular. It was so spectacular they decided to follow it. It seemed to beckon them on a journey. After a very long time (I know, vague), they found themselves in the bustling city of Jerusalem. They were strangers with different clothing and accents.

(Cut to the palace)

Slimy, greasy Herod sitting in his huge stone dining room feasting on raw meat and too much wine from his vineyards. His dark hair is clinging to his scalp, badly in need of a wash. His breath smells like death. His crooked teeth look like fangs, and his small dark eyes radiate fear and hatred. Everyone who works for him is scared to death – literally – because he's known to behead anyone who whistles off-key in the hallway or someone whose nose doesn't quite touch the ground when in his presence. Murdering his family members is a fun little pastime. He screams and yells like a tyrant one moment, then cries like a petulant baby the next. Not the man you want running your part of the Middle East.

The wise ones begin to ask about the baby who has been born king of the Jews. "We have followed his star and we would like to find him and pay him homage."

"Homage" means publicly giving special honor to another. It is not a private note or text message. It is going in front of the world, or at least the part you are standing in, and proclaiming your honor to the glory of the one you have sought.

When it gets around town that the strangers with funny names and accents are asking about a baby king, they are quickly pointed in the direction of Herod's palace. "Go talk to him about it."

Ding-dong. Guests have arrived and would like to have an audience with the odious king.

Herod can put on a good front, sort of. The guests are invited into the King's throne room. They bow to Herod with open hearts and stars in their eyes as they eagerly ask about the baby king of the Jews. Herod gives them a greasy smile (kind of like the Grinch) and says, "Excuse me gentlemen. I need a moment. Help yourself to some falafel in the room next door."

Herod was frightened. It says so right in the bible. And because he was frightened, so was all Jerusalem. Who knew what kind of insanity he would cause around town when he was threatened?

Herod pulled together his clergy and demanded where the child was to be born, the child who was supposedly "king of the Jews." He spit when he talked.

"Ahem, well sir," said one, "the prophet (Micah) proclaimed Bethlehem was the place. Yep, Bethlehem." The soulless clergy pointed a long finger at a papyrus passage.

King Herod called the foreigners back to him and told a whopper of a lie. One of the biggest lies he had ever uttered. First, he said, "Bethlehem is the place. Not quite six miles south of here. It's kind of a no-nothing town, but you go there and find this baby." (He spit again when he said 'baby.') Then he lied with a wicked smile... "Send word to me and tell me exactly where the little interloper... I mean little one is. I, too, want to pay homage."

The wise ones were so happy to get back out in the fresh air. The king smelled like a corpse that had sat too long in the heat of the day. They shook out their cloaks and took deep breaths.

The star was above them and it moved south. Sparkling and shining and leading the way.

Then they saw it hover. It had stopped over the house where the king of the Jews was taking a nap. And the wise ones were overwhelmed with joy. Overwhelmed!

One of the wise ones knocked on the door. Tap, tap, tap.

A very young woman opened the door. She had curious eyes and a tired smile. Strangers didn't bother her much anymore. After conversations with angels, shepherds, and prophets in the temple had all filled her pondering heart, she welcomed strangers as if they were old friends. Her

baby wasn't hers. He belonged to the world. She needed to love him, protect him, feed him, and change his diapers. This knowledge filled her with a mix of pride and sadness. She loved her baby boy.

The wise ones bowed slightly. "We have come to see the king."

"Ah. Yes. He's taking a little nap but should be awake soon. I'm his mother. Would you like to come in? Have a cup of fresh mint tea?"

It wasn't long before they heard a cry. The mother brought the little king to meet their guests. It became very quiet in the house except for the pleasant gurgle of the baby. He sat in his mother's lap and clapped his hands as she kissed his neck and tickled his arms. The wise ones noticed right away that he had his mother's eyes. They were full of curiosity and wonder.

And stars.

The wise ones knelt down and paid homage to the king.

From underneath their cloaks they opened boxes and bags. The very first Christmas presents, although no one knew that then.

Gold was given, because he was a king. Frankincense was given because he would be the priest of all the world. Myrrh was given to symbolize his death. Not such great gifts for a baby. But his mother politely said thank you and set the gifts on a small table away from the baby.

She invited the new friends to stay the night. Then, as she made dinner the wise ones sat on the floor and played with the baby king. It was a happy evening full of stories and hope. As the mother put the baby to bed, the wise ones quietly agreed among themselves that the world seemed kinder. It seemed safer and protected and full of God.

They drifted off to sleep on the living room floor and all had the same dream, brought to them by an angel. Herod was chasing them with swordsmen on horses. He was screaming through his spittle, commanding the swordsmen to kill the wise ones. But instead, they broke into the holy house where the true king, the baby king, slept soundly in his tiny bed, and they killed him.

An angel whispered in their heads, "Do not return to Jerusalem." As if they couldn't figure that one out for themselves.

The wise ones awoke at once. It took a bit for them to remember where they were. They whispered about their dreams, nightmares, and their fears. Then they heard the mother in the kitchen making breakfast.

After large bowls of oatmeal and fresh figs, the wise ones packed up their few belongings. They thanked the mother for all her hospitality, then kissed the tiny king on the top of his downy head.

Once outside, they looked up to the sky but the star was gone. It had left their eyes and lived in their hearts now.

They didn't have to discuss much as they turned toward the east. They would not head north to Jerusalem and the evil king. They would be going home by a different road. They would bring stories with them of adventure, wickedness, truth, and salvation. And they would try to explain how it felt to hold a little one with curious eyes and a bubbling laugh, a king who had come to save them all.

To save us all.

May we always be curious and full of wonder about Jesus Christ. And always, yes always, travel with the star in our hearts.

The end. Amen.