

We have just heard one of the all time great stories, celebrated in legend and song, poetry, opera, and art. The exotic visitors from the East stir our imaginations, as they stirred the imaginations and fears of King Herod and his court, and of all Jerusalem, Matthew says. Something of the greatest importance has happened, and the arrival of strangers from the East is a sign that all the world will respond to it, with reverence, or with fear.

How strange and mysterious that foreigners, aliens, from outside the history and tradition of God's people, would come seeking the child born king of the Jews. "From the East," so far away and unknown that their country or countries are not named.

They came so great a distance to honor the newborn king of a small, insignificant a people who had no influence in world affairs, and were subject to an even more distant empire? These foreigners were "wise men," Magi: astrologers, interpreters of dreams and of signs and events both earthly and cosmic. They were outsiders, but they were outsiders who knew something almost no one else had yet learned, something totally unknown to anyone with power or influence in Jerusalem

They knew of some ancient prophecy that a new star would signal the birth of a king, one whose power and influence would extend far beyond the people to whom he was born. His significance had been planted outside his own country long before his birth. We do not know if the Magi had been watching for the star, or if it had just appeared. Maybe they consulted old records and prophecies; maybe one of them remembered hearing about the star and the king it would herald, a king who would rule with righteousness, whose light would pierce the darkness that covered the earth.

They came as we come, seeking meaning and truth, something broader and deeper than they had yet known. They knew the only thing to do when the new star of the new king appeared was to go to find him, and then to bow down and worship.

And so they followed the star to Jerusalem, the holy city, straight to the palace of Herod—that would be the place. But the one they were looking for was not there. City and palace were quiet, no signs of a celebration there. Everything was business as usual: keep Rome happy, or at least at a safe distance; keep the people under control. At least that's how it was until the strangers from the East came asking questions, and Herod would want to keep it that way.

The news brought by the foreigners was most disturbing. And, while Herod had been in the dark up until the wise men came looking for the child, he was not ignorant of his own people's tradition. He knew of a Messiah promised to Israel. So he consulted with Israel's own wise men, the chief priests and scribes, to find out where the child was to be born. And he quickly made a plan.

He sent the foreigners off with a lie, feigning enthusiasm to come and pay homage to the child himself. Which would, of course, have been the only appropriate response to the coming of Emmanuel, God With Us.

The story has a feeling of mystery, almost of fantasy, about it. This is partly because it leaves so much room for the imagination. There is a sense of wonder, suggesting deep meaning, but it is *not* fantasy. For Matthew, the arrival of the Magi from the East, who came looking for the child is part of the divine plan that has been in the works from the beginning. It is something quite solid, real, and reliable.

The author of the Gospel according to Matthew knew this story and saw in it the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah that all nations and peoples will be drawn to the light and glory of the LORD in Jerusalem. “Nations [Gentiles—that’s us] shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” (60:3)

The plan of God known to Matthew is for all peoples to be included in God’s realm of justice and mercy, so that no one, no people, or class, or group will be outsiders or strangers. The coming of the wise men signaled the beginning of the unfolding of that plan, in Jesus. In time, he would welcome and heal people of all kinds, Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, powerless and powerful, sinners and righteous. Matthew is the gospel that ends with Jesus’ commission to the disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (29:19-20).

As the wise men have come from “the East,” from outside and far away to see and know this newborn king who is Emmanuel, God with us, and then returned again, so we are to come to worship him and then go out as his disciples, into the world, even into the unknown, radiant with the light of Christ, to make him known. And so, in Matthew, the beginning and the ending of the story are one.

But Herod, “having his heart set on no better world,”¹ aimed only to preserve what he had in this one, imperfect though it was and is. His *chutzpah* amazes me—that he would imagine he could outsmart God and derail God’s purpose by killing the child. But then, he was far from alone in imagining such a thing. Jesus would die in Jerusalem with the inscription “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews” above his head. His death already was anticipated at his birth. Indeed, it was his death that makes the story of his birth worth telling.

With what arrogance, with what apparent impunity, leaders of peoples and nations do go on telling lies, wielding power and even committing murder, to protect their own interests over the welfare and even the lives of their people, all of whom are children of God!

¹A phrase copied; the citation lost.

As the story begins, it looks forward, toward the end, and beyond. It speaks a truth we know all too well in our own time: when the light came into the darkness of the world, it was worshiped, but it was also feared and opposed.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you,” Isaiah calls out . But sometimes we’re afraid of that light, afraid it will reveal things we might rather keep hidden: our compromises and accommodations with injustice, wounds we’ve grown accustomed to living with, broken relationships that seem too painful to try to heal.

“Change” may be the watchword in the presidential campaigns at the moment, but change can be disturbing, threatening, at least when you think you have something to lose. And so, change sets those who see themselves as insiders, against the outsiders; when God’s plan is simply to get us all together, no insiders, no outsiders any more.

We have been baptized into that plan, and we are part of it. Haden Cole has come to be baptized into that plan this morning, he becomes part of it this day. Like Haden, we are all called by our baptism not only to come to the light of Christ ourselves, but to carry it out with us into the world—a big job for a little fellow! It is a high calling, filled with unexpected challenges and joys, worth everything we are and have, everything we have to give.

Jesus’ last words to the disciples at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew are, “. . . remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (28:29). However staid and predictable the journey of our life may seem, or however rocky, the unexpected will inevitably break in sooner or later. We will find ourselves, like the Magi, setting off into the unknown. We journey on both seeking and bringing his presence wherever we go. No matter how dark or unfamiliar the way, we do not journey alone.

The birth of Christ was heralded by the light of a star. His resurrection from the darkness of death was heralded by an angel whose appearance was like lightning (28:3). There is no way and no place in this life that is not known to him. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.” (Isa. 60:1) The light of his star at its rising has become the light of his resurrection, that shines down every path in our life, however dark or uncertain. “Even the darkness is not dark to him; the night is as bright as the day.” (Ps. 139:12)