

Sermon January 6, 2019 Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the birth of Jesus as told in the Gospel of Matthew is considerably different from the one most of us remember. In the most familiar version, which comes from Luke, Joseph and the very pregnant Mary arrive in Bethlehem by donkey to be taxed, there is no room at the inn, and the birth takes place in a stable, in a manger full of hay. The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes. Shepherds hear the good news from an angel and visit the stable to pay their respects. “Gloria in excelsis Deo!”

In Matthew it is quite different. Jesus is born in a house. There is nothing to say that Mary and Joseph don't live there permanently and the angel visits Joseph, not Mary. There is quite a bit of political intrigue centring around Herod. Then as now, that results in horrific violence – in the slaughter of the innocents – as Herod tries to root out his rival before He is old enough to become King of the Jews, a title to which Herod himself has already laid claim.

Perhaps politics and violence are why the Matthean account has not held our imaginations in the same way. Perhaps we have had enough of those in the other 51 weeks of the year and need a

tiny break from them just now. We just seem to forget Matthew in favour of Luke's pastoral idyll of the (newborn) king.

But there is one thing we always remember from Matthew: the visit of three kings from the mystic east who follow a star to the place of Jesus' birth. They add quite a bit of exotic colour and mystique to the story. Perhaps that's why we always remember them while *forgetting* pretty much everything else about Matthew's story. And there may be other reasons. Part of me thinks that the reason we remember them is that deep down they represent us in the birth tableau. The life of a shepherd is pretty far fetched for most of us probably - not all of us of course - but most of us would be pretty unfamiliar with the sights, smells, and physical challenges of the lonely goatherd. But perhaps there is a part of us that feels that we three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar. Turning up in amazing clothes with a beautifully wrapped expensive gift - one that represents everything we want to say and have to give - perhaps that feels more familiar for some of us, in a good way.

Pope Francis once made headlines when he invited "even nonbelievers" to join in his Christmas prayer for peace. It was thought to show a groundbreaking openness never before seen

from a Christian leader, but it has a biblical precedent. In the gospel, this is who the three kings represent. The bible is not explicit about this, but tradition has long held that they were “magi,” followers of Zoroastrianism, a wisdom religion originating in Persia. They worshipped a deity called Ahura Mazda - the same who gave his name to a familiar brand of Japanese car. They are Gentiles, from outside the Jewish fold, non-believers in that sense.

The presence of these ‘non-believers’ is important. This birth is not just for us, not just for believers. It is for all people. It is true of course, that every birth is a miracle. But this season, this festival, this event is not just about birth. It is much more. We say so every Sunday when, in saying the Nicene Creed, we recite the doctrine of the incarnation:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one being with the Father.

Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation

he came down from heaven:

by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,

and was made man.

This Christ child, This Holy One who was born at Bethlehem, *pre-existed*. Present in His divine nature at the first moment of creation itself, He is the One through whom God made all things. We always speak of Him in the present tense because He is eternal. In Him, the Godhead, the Maker of All Creation, became incarnate. He took flesh and became a person like you and me, sharing our human condition. That is a pretty major claim. The Big Bang of Big Bangs it is really. In explaining how and why the incarnation is true, theologians have always drawn deeply at the deep well that is the scriptures of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Apocrypha, and also at times on the resources of classical philosophy and metaphysics. In many ways, the Nicene Creed is a carefully constructed statement of all of the above and especially of the doctrine of the Incarnation.

But the question that haunts the preacher now, is “How is it true for us now in 2018, given that we now have a vastly expanded conception of the universe and creation, and live immersed in a creation story based not on God but on the Big Bang?”

In other words, how is today an epiphany for *us*? and not just the memorial recitation of a quaint story from antiquity?

The answer for me personally lies in the awe I experience when I notice NOT how quaint and limited the insight of the Magi was, but how far seeing it was. Somehow they already knew that it was cosmic, that the story of our origins *is* written in the stars AND they brought that wisdom to bear in a worshipful visit to the birthing bed of a human person. There is my epiphany. The Big Bang is personal. It is not just cold and old. It bore me, gave me, gave us birth. So we can turn and face the Creator spiritually, address her in our own language because she is our Mother, and the loving Mother of worlds upon worlds, most personally this world in which we so gratefully live among them.

This is what the birth of Jesus announces: that we are part of it! The incarnation is not just about Christ but also about us. It calls us to the faith that through our God-given creative abilities,

intelligence, and through our actions, we have a role to play in God's cosmic mission. We are *not* just the fleshy shrapnel of some long ago explosion as we sometimes fall 'empirically' into thinking, not just theoretical bystanders, but fully actors in the cosmic drama by virtue of the personal divine. I hope it won't seem too convoluted to say that the incarnation provides us with a spiritual *technology* by which we can be in loving and personal relationship with what otherwise will seem remote, impersonal, and mute. This relationship is not just with the cosmos and the creation, but with the maker of the same, who does not exist for us until He is personal. So Hallelujah that Christ is born! Gloria in excelsis Deo. The Word made flesh is our epiphany.