

Ellisforde Church of the Brethren

1-5-20

Hebrews 1: 1-3

Three Characters of Christmas

Matthew 2: 1-12

After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judaea during the reign of King Herod, suddenly some wise men came to Jerusalem from the east asking, 'Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'At Bethlehem in Judaea, for this is what the prophet wrote: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least among the leaders of Judah, for from you will come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.' Then Herod summoned the wise men to see him privately. He asked them the exact date on which the star had appeared and sent them on to Bethlehem with the words, 'Go and find out all about the child, and when you have found him, let me know, so that I too may go and do him homage.' Having listened to what the king had to say, they set out. And suddenly the star they had seen rising went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But they were given a warning in a dream not to go back to Herod, and returned to their own country by a different way.

Hebrews 1: 1-3

At many moments in the past and by many means, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our time, God has spoken to us in the person of the Son, whom God appointed heir of all things and through whom God made the ages. The Son is the reflection of God's glory and bears the impress of God's own being, sustaining all things by his powerful command; and now that he has purged sins away, he has taken his seat at the right hand of the divine Majesty on high.

Today we celebrate the wisemen who arrived at Jesus' birth place with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But instead of focusing on these travelers by themselves, on this Epiphany Sunday, I thought we might take a look at a *few* of the characters who make up our Christmas story, including these wise men but not starting with them. And then think about what they represent *for* us and sometimes *in* us.

One of the first characters we come across in the Christmas story is Herod, known as Herod the Great or King Herod, and he ruled over the Jews in Israel before and during Jesus' birth. We learn about him in Matthew's gospel, where the wise men met him in Jerusalem on their way to worship the baby Jesus. And they told Herod that the prophecy of old had announced a new king of the Jews was to be born in Bethlehem, and Herod tried to trick the Magi into revealing the exact birth location to him once they arrived in Bethlehem, but they were warned in a dream to avoid Herod so they returned to their own country by a different route. And when Herod learned he had been outwitted, he became furious and ordered the slaughter of all boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were younger than two years, because this baby was a threat to his power, this future king of the Jews. Then Joseph also was warned in a dream by an angel to take Mary and their baby to Egypt, to escape Herod's decree in Bethlehem, and they didn't return to Israel until after Herod's death.

Herod reigned for 37 years, and when he died his kingdom was divided among his three sons, one of them being Herod Antipas, who was present later for Jesus' trial and execution.

So Herod is in our Christmas story, even though he represents the other side of the Christmas message, that is, the other side of hope, and of peace and of

joy and of love. Maybe the Christmas message part of Herod's story is a warning message, to each of us, that whenever we allow ourselves to resist bowing down to anyone except ourselves, and we all do sometimes, or when we resist the invitation of Love and Light in our lives, and we do sometimes – maybe we want to outshine the Light if possible, or maybe even destroy it – if that's where we find ourselves, then we are in a dangerous place. Herod allowed the power of domination to overcome him, and we want to resist going there with him. Because that's not the call of the Christmas story. So there's Herod as a warning.

There's also Mary, and she's perhaps our favorite Christmas character. We love her partly because in her we have a picture of a young girl who is loving and gentle and wise and holy, but who is also powerful and prophetic. She's not just a teenage girl willing to accept God's call to become the mother of the Messiah. She knows what it's like to be lowly *and* exalted, and in her understanding of both depth and height, she gives voice to God's glory and to God's care for the oppressed and marginalized well beyond the border of her own community. The sequence of Mary's story is that she is visited by an angel, who greets her as "favored one," then tells her not to be afraid with this news that she will be a mother, then reveals to her that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant in her old age. When she visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth says to her, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." So Mary has been told this incredible and pretty disconcerting news, and now she knows that Elizabeth knows also. These two women in first-century Palestine where women were of very low account in the scheme of things. A woman without a father, or a husband, or son to provide for her was effectively destitute, and women's words had so little worth that a woman had no say in public and not in private either,

unless she were surrounded only by other women, and even then, she would have to be the matriarch. Mary was a teenager in this story.

And she responds to Elizabeth's greeting with an out-pouring of the Spirit, in a song we know as the Magnificat. Her words are full of trust and wisdom and poetry. Clearly, God is doing a new thing here! A woman raised up, full of the spirit, to birth a long awaited Messiah not in the Temple, not in a kingly palace, but in a stable. So the place of power is changing with this story. And that's the message of Mary. That her son, born of the Spirit, would be willing to give up the power and glory that Herod wouldn't give up, in order to bless every single person he encountered. God's love is that wide. And that's new in first century Palestine.

One question for us out of Mary's story is how do we see the poor and lowly in our own context. Do we see them as bearers of God? Is God continuing to do a new thing for us in every person we encounter? Because if we want to hear God in Mary's words then we'd better prepare ourselves to receive that voice in the people we'd least expect to represent her.

And then there are the Wise Men themselves, whom we celebrate today arriving at Jesus' manger to honor him. And who are these ones? Well, we have learned that they are probably Zoroastrian priests, that some of the first people to believe in the miracle of Jesus' presence on earth, were not part of Jesus own community. They weren't even neighboring_Gentiles. They were strangers who were called to come from far away and celebrate this birth, and so they did. As simple as that. They didn't have the same customs or skin shade or world view, or the same religious roots as Jesus' community. So why did they come from so far? Whatever their story, and there have been various ones passed down

through the centuries, we do know they travelled a very long way and for a very long time to be in the presence of this holy child, and to offer him some precious treasures. The story that comes down to us is that they didn't ask a lot of questions; they just came. That's the part that sticks with me. They were called to come and honor a new life, and they did. And who, I wonder, are their present day equivalents? Who are the unexpected people who show up from time to time in your life and in my life, honoring us and offering us precious gifts? Who goes far out of their way to reach you and me? As we read the New Testament stories and this Christmas story in particular, we bring the message of Love and Light into our own lives in ways that make us new people. We are called to honor each other as we hear about Jesus being honored, to treat each other with profound love and compassion, as we read that the baby Jesus was treated with profound love and compassion. So I read this part of the Christmas story and I ask myself, Who are the ones who have reached out to me in unexpected ways, and likewise, when have I reached out to someone else bearing the gifts of profound love and compassion and respect? When have I heard the call to go and honor someone, and I just did it without asking any questions?

So through these three characters, Herod, Mary, and the Magi, there is a warning and there's an invitation for us. The warning is not to get caught up in the old ways, the ways of power and domination, going along to get along and all that comes with that mindset. And the invitation is accepting the journey into the new, that is Christmas. Mary's message and the wise men's message, that the path of Christmas and Epiphany follow the light of proclamation and invitation, and glory, and profound respect, which is the very heart of God. A Christmas

story we read once a year, is a story that is always happening within us and among us. So as we're at the end of this season, may it be a new beginning for us.