

Sunday, January 2, 2022

Texts: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

Title: "About Those Magi"

Jean Rodenbough tells about a friend of hers whose family was getting together for Christmas. They drove through the town in which they were staying and passed by the Episcopal Church that had a manger scene in front. Her friend's 5-year-old nephew asked about the meaning of it. "That's Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, there in the manger," her friend explained. A few blocks further on they passed the Methodist church, where they had a scene was depicting the Wise Men. "Who are they?" the nephew asked. His mother replied, "Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus." "Well," the nephew said, "they won't find him there. He's back there at the Episcopal church."

No, they didn't find him at the Methodist church nor apparently did they find him in a manger either. In our passage this morning, Matthew writes that the Magi entered the **house** not a **stable** where they saw the child with his mother Mary. Maybe by this time they had moved to a different location.

We actually know very little about the magi. They've been described as kings although they're not described as such. But they weren't peasants as King Herod wouldn't have been upset if three peasants had come seeking the newborn king so maybe they were kings.

Scholars believe that the magi traveled as many as twelve hundred miles from Persia to Judea in order to see the child and to pay him homage. At that distance, they could have been traveling for up to five months, guided by the star.

There are many questions about the details of the birth of Jesus and the Magi but it's important to know that it's the spirit of the season that matters—not that all the i's are dotted, and t's crossed. However, there are some traditions that are on much firmer ground one being **the character of King Herod**.

You may be surprised to hear this but there is more evidence about King Herod from original sources than anyone else in that time...more than Jesus or Paul or Caesar Augustus or any of them. And this is because of the extensive writings of the historian Josephus.

Herod had quite an impact on the world of his time. He was notorious for his building programs. He built tremendous fortifications, including the temple mount in Jerusalem. And as you may know, he was one nasty guy. Over the years he killed many people—including his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law and one of his several wives. Herod the Great was a killer. That was his nature. He killed out of spite and he killed to stay in power. Human life meant nothing to him. Josephus called him 'barbaric.'

Perhaps his basic character can best be seen by one incident in the year 7 B.C. Herod is an old man now. He has been in power 41 years. He knows he doesn't have

much longer to live. Word comes that his sons are plotting to overthrow him. They are sons by his late wife Marianne. He orders them put to death . . . by strangling.”

So it should send a chill up our spine when we read that King Herod was asking about the one who was born “king of the Jews?” Ironically, however, the Roman Senate had bestowed on him the title, “King of the Jews.” There’s no way the Jews could have two kings.

King Herod asking the Jewish priest and teachers of the law where this “King of the Jews” was to have been born and they said, Bethlehem as the prophet Micah had written. And then he met with the Magi and asked them to report back to him so he could supposedly go and worship him.

But of course, worship was the last thing on his mind. So as we leave the joy and warmth and love of Christmas and move to Epiphany, we enter what some would call the real world where love is endangered by hate—joy is threatened by fear—and kindness is overshadowed by evil. Sounds like our world today, doesn’t it?

After the Magi came to visit the child Jesus and Mary, they knew not to go back and report to Herod. They were overjoyed. They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold (royalty), frankincense (diety) and myrrh (used for embalming).”

Friends, it’s no accident that above Jesus head as he hung on the cross was a sign that said, “King of the Jews.” Just as Jesus’ spirit lives on, so does, I’m afraid, the

spirit of King Herod. There are still those whose love of power and position cause them to do much evil in this world. Children still die in places where their families are exploited, and children are deprived.

That's why Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . ." for God's will is that one day the King of love will rule over all and not the King Herods of this world.

You and I have our part to play in this drama. We're called to love our neighbor as ourselves and to care for the "others" of this world ahead of ourselves. And we pray that the day will come where the love of Christ will live in every heart. May God's love live in your heart in 2022. Amen.