

### **“Mystical Visit” – Mat 2:1-12 – Jan 7/07**

Today is a fun day, marking the fifth anniversary of my induction here at Central. By contrast tomorrow, however, marks a somewhat sad and challenging day. Yes, it's the first day back to school following the Christmas break. At least it's sad and challenging for we who are students, but it's not really sad for parents! I suspect most parents of school-age children are dancing and rejoicing, because the children are finally going back to school. No more kids hanging around the house, wondering what to do. No more challenges for parents trying to keep them interested and occupied. Back to the routine of lunches, homework, and day care; but also back to having a bit of free time. As short as the school day is, having the children at school still provides a few hours of release, and some freedom to get something done, or maybe to get nothing done. Having children home all day does disrupt the schedule a bit, doesn't it?

But children, and especially babies, are like that, aren't they? They do disrupt our lives, don't they? Be honest, now. Once you get past the ooh's and aah's you have to admit babies can be a pile of trouble. Turning schedules upside down, causing sleepless nights, needing food, diaper changes, and just plain attention. Oh yes, babies in general are a lot of trouble.

But certainly not enough trouble to stir up a whole city, or a whole nation. Babies are hardly worth the trouble of sending out secret agents and troops to search the land. While we read only the opening verses, I think most of us are familiar with the way the story in our text turns out, with Herod doing exactly that – sending spies and troops out to find and destroy all suspect children in Bethlehem and the surrounding district. What was it that set him into such a rage? What was so special about the particular baby in this story to trigger Herod into such an angry response?

To answer that question it helps to understand that the engine that drives anger is fear. Most often fear comes from anticipating being hurt, a reaction to some potential act of evil. We can easily understand that kind of reaction, we can easily understand fearing evil and reacting angrily to it. But sadly people sometimes also are also afraid of goodness, and likewise react with fear, with anger and even violence. I know, reacting so negatively to goodness sounds a bit bizarre, but we have only to look at the news on any given day to see tragic examples of aid workers, Doctors serving with Médecins Sans Frontières, nurses, social workers, lay people and clergy, all murdered simply because they were dedicating their lives in the service of helping others, the most basic kind of goodness. Those who commit such murders fear that the kind of goodness displayed in the name of either faith or humanity will become contagious and spread, limiting their own power, and so believe the acts of goodness must be snuffed out in violence as a warning.

We see a parallel to this tragedy in the gospel story where Herod sees some special goodness in this baby born in Bethlehem, and fears it, and moves to take violent action against the baby and the goodness the baby represents. But that's rushing to the end of this story – we need to back up to the beginning to see how it began, and in the unfolding begin to understand not only something about the people in the story but about ourselves as well.

The story begins simply, and seemingly innocently enough, with the birth of a baby in a small town not too far from Jerusalem. Not the kind of event that would make the daily papers, let alone reverberate around the world. And yet even in a simple, one-

line birth announcement Matthew begins to show how this tiny event was the beginning of conflict between two kings, a conflict that would grow to represent the struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness, between life and death. “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea” ... it seems like a simple enough declaration, and yet it was an announcement that echoed another birth years before in the same place – the birth of the mightiest monarch in Israel’s history, King David. And firmly setting the king-versus-king scenario Matthew reminds us that this new but already-significant birth took place in the days of Herod, the king. The drums of conflict and holy war are already beating in the background in the first line of this story of proclamation, and it quickly becomes apparent who is on which side, the existing king personifying the forces of evil and darkness, and the newborn king incarnating the forces of goodness and light.

Now as sweet as babies are, it is still difficult to swallow that a baby could somehow be the champion of the cause of goodness and light, and so Matthew wants us to see all the signs that that is indeed the case – to see a baby whose birth is so significant that it causes ripples in the fabric of the universe detectable far outside the boundaries of Israel. Ripples detected by foreign astrologers, wise men – neither numbered nor named – who could see what was to come even if the Israelites couldn’t see it right under their own noses. Signs, portents and forces so strongly good that even these rich and powerful men were drawn to travel from afar to see for themselves, and in so doing fulfilling a prediction long before written in Scripture, prophetic pronouncements that the leaders of all nations would come to worship this special one born to bring light to the whole world (hence the mislabeling of them as kings in hymns).

The true character of the other king in the story, Herod, also soon becomes readily apparent. Troubled not so much by the arrival of these foreign mystics as by their searching for “the king of the Jews” and troubled even more so by meaning “not him”, Herod soon becomes the arch-villain in the story. A number of images come to mind, ranging from the “Snidely Whiplash” kind of sleek, sneaky character twisting his long, pointy moustache and laughing with evil intent, through the Sheriff of Nottingham so beautifully portrayed by in the Kevin Costner version of Robin Hood, to the rotund and malevolent self-serving Nero-figure in movies about Rome. Those images are enhanced by the actions of Herod, surrounded by a large staff of power-seeking toadies, calling for secret meetings with the foreign dignitaries, and carrying out nefarious acts of probing and seeking for the newborn child while smarmily professing outwardly the best of motives.

Fortunately, nobody is fooled, least of all the rich and powerful foreigners. While Herod sneaks around in the dark, the light of God divinely guides the wise men to the Light of God, and with no trouble at all they find the child and his mother Mary. In a further fulfillment of prophetic scripture and in an act fittingly for foreign emissaries in audience before a king, they open both their hearts and their treasure boxes, and offer both gifts of great value and their loyal worship. It comes as no surprise that these men, called ‘wise’ for good reason, who were able to detect from afar the impact of this holy child upon the whole world, were also able from close up to detect the darkness and deception in Herod’s heart. No fools, these wise men, as they changed their itinerary and slipped back out of the country while Herod and his snoops were busy looking for the baby Jesus in all the wrong places.

If we had read on just a little bit further, we would have been treated to Herod shouting in rage, “Curses – foiled again!” and sending out his murderous agents to do harm, but for now we have the full intent of Matthew’s proclamation: that this child was truly the Messiah, the holy king of Israel past, present and future; that this was the branch of Jesse’s lineage, the one promised long before in Scripture, to whom the nations would come with gifts and worship; that this was the Son of God who would bring the light of God’s love to all nations, even to the whole world. Indeed our very presence here this morning bears witness to that proclamation, not that we are all wise men – not all of us are men and not all of us are wise - but we do come from every corner of the earth, from a representative set of “all nations,” gathered to offer praise and worship to that child born so long ago in Bethlehem of Judea. Like the wise men, we also come opening our hearts, offering what we have in his service, presenting ourselves to him.

For most of us, I’m sure, the path to find that holy child – the fount of all goodness and light – was nowhere near as simple and as clear as it was for the wise men. Many if not all of us have wandered in our own darkness, either failing to see or ignoring the light provided by God as a beacon. And yet, praise God, we have persisted in our search, and like those wise men kneel before the Christ child, offering what we can. But also like the wise men, we are called to move on. The story didn’t end with the wise men moving in, or even setting up camp in the house where they found Mary and the child. They moved on, back into their own lives, touched, affected, and changed by the encounter but back into their own places they went. Once a week, or even once a year, we have the blessed opportunity to re-enact their encounter, to be touched by the event and significance of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem of Judea, born the king of the Jews, the Son of God, the light of the world. But once we have knelt before the child, and offered our gifts, it is time for us to once more move back out into our own places, and in so doing to carry forth the light brought by Christ. Time for us, shaped by his universe-shaking goodness to go and let that goodness shine forth from us, visible in our actions. The ways to do that are as numerous as the stars, the places in which to do good are as diverse as our backgrounds, but they can be summarized in Christ’s own words: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the grieving, visit the lonely, love one another. It’s not always easy, and there will be times when you will provoke the anger and hostility of the world towards goodness. But the call is as clear as the light of God’s love that will guide you, and as strong as the love of God that will sustain you: Go, shine forth that light and love of God in the name of the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth, even Christ our Lord.