

“Strange Pilgrims” – Mat 2:1-12

I’ll begin this morning with a quick survey. How many of you, when listening to the reading from Matthew’s gospel, were saying to yourself, “this is a weird story!”? Or to put it a different way, how many of you were asking, “how can such things have happened?”?

Hmmm ... I was hoping that most if not all of you were asking those kind of questions, or at least feeling somehow that things in this chunk of Matthew’s gospel weren’t quite adding up realistically. Why? Well, if you were thinking those kinds of thoughts that would tell me that you would be ready to move beyond an overly simplistic – not to mention totally inaccurate – Christmas-card inspired misunderstanding of this text.

I suspect all of you can remember seeing Christmas cards that depict a scene of Bethlehem seen from a hilltop, complete with shepherds and sheep, angels hovering overhead, a star in the upper right corner, and three ornately crowned figures on camels heading toward a modest stable that has a light shining from the half-door. Shepherds, angels, a star, three kings just like in the carols, and a light shining forth. All the symbols from all the gospels nicely put together in one image. What could be wrong with this picture?

What, indeed! Where do I begin?! Let’s start by noting that the star and the three figures are put into that picture based on this text from Matthew’s gospel, and begin to understand that the events described here are not part of Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus. In fact, Matthew actually gives very little in the way of details about the birth of Jesus – an angel appears to Joseph; tells him to take Mary, now pregnant, as his wife; to name the baby Jesus. He did, she did, he did. That’s it ... that’s the whole birth story in Matthew’s gospel. All the rest of what we remember fondly comes from Luke’s gospel, except the part about the magi which does come from Matthew but isn’t even part of the birth story.

Confused? Good! Because you can’t begin to understand what Matthew was trying to tell us with this incident with the magical foreign visitors until you can detach it from what you think you know about the birth of Jesus. Matthew even tries to signal to you that this stuff happens after the birth of Jesus – not days, not weeks, but months and perhaps even a couple of years after his birth.

So, if this is not part of the birth story, what is it about? Why did Matthew include it? To answer the second question first, we recognize that six times Matthew declares that an event involving Jesus “fulfills what had been spoken through the prophet” – all leading up to the seventh (i.e. complete) fulfilling, that of the prophecy of John the Baptizer. Each of the incidents: the announcing of the birth, a ruler that comes from Bethlehem, a son called out of Egypt, wailing and lamentation in Ramah, that the messiah will be called a Nazarene, and the way will be prepared in the wilderness, each of these are affirmed by Matthew as fulfilled by Jesus thus affirming that he is truly the one spoken of in the Hebrew scriptures.

Our reading is the second of these fulfilling events, namely a ruler that comes from Bethlehem. But how could this prophecy be fulfilled by Jesus, who was never crowned as a political king and was indeed born into a country that already had a king, Herod? Drawing upon other prophecy from Isaiah (which we also read) and a declaration in Numbers 24:17 about a star rising out of Jacob, Matthew tells us that Christ appears not just for Israel alone but for the entire world. According to this account the impact of Jesus’ birth is so significant that it can be detected even by astrologers in far-off lands (in Star Wars terms, there is a “ripple in the Force”). These visitors – neither numbered nor named in the text – are not kings but astrologers, sorcerers, **magicians**. When they talk to Herod about “his star rising” they are talking in astrological rather than astrophysical terms. This is, in a sense, “holy horoscoping”!

So far, this is all good, right? Three important foreigners, detecting the cosmic effect of Jesus' birth, come to acknowledge his divine kingship, offering gifts worth a not-so-small fortune. Surely this is like winning the lottery, like the best of good news, a cause for celebration. At last a king representing the ultimate in good news has arrived by the grace of God, and all should be happy and pleased!

Not so, however, for immediately we are reminded in the story how so much of the world reacts to grace – in fear and trembling, feeling threatened, and reacting in hostile ways. Usually when people get angry it's because of something they fear, and most often the something that is the source of their fear is evil. We can easily understand that kind of reaction, we can easily understand fearing evil and reacting angrily to it. But people often also fear goodness and react with anger and even violence. This reaction against goodness recently came to mind when I saw in the news on TV that the various groups that look after the church in Bethlehem had set upon each other in fist fights, presumable over who had the right to clean what.

Of course there are countless other examples of people being threatened by good, by grace. Movements towards rehabilitation in our justice system are touted as being 'too soft on crime' accompanied by harsh cries for punishment and vengeance, even when all statistics clearly show the positive value to society of humane approaches. Efforts to ensure that the poor, including or especially the working poor, get a dignified portion of the wealth of society are often countered with fearful and ungraceful attacks usually based on some variation of the theme that "they haven't earned it!" Attempts to grace aging pensioners with the same level or speed of medical treatment accorded to WCB claimants are reacted to with horror and cut down at the first opportunity.

But all is not hopeless in Matthew's gospel, and we see the grace of God clearly at work both in this one incident and indeed throughout the entire gospel. Here the important foreigners not only get to meet the King-to-be that they had sought so diligently, they were also kept safe from the clutches of Herod, being warned in a dream to take a detour home. We see Jesus being kept safe and continuing to grow into his ministry by the grace of God. Throughout the gospel we see Jesus overcoming all – even death itself – through the grace of God. Matthew's message is clear as can be, that while the world may feel threatened by grace, even react in outrage and anger against grace, the grace of God wins out.

That's where a better understanding of this odd portion of Matthew's gospel comes to touch our lives and to help us. If we think of this incident only as three Oriental kings offering gifts to the baby in the manger on that one night, then we miss the message of the power of God's grace for us. Seeing instead how they are part of the gospel story of the good news of God's grace in Christ overcoming all forms of evil, oppression, hatred and fear helps us to understand that as we too observe and encounter reactions by people threatened by grace we can have hope that grace will win out.

Recently I've been doing a lot of reading about church architecture and design, and one of the concepts that has emerged for me from this reading is that of pilgrimages and pilgrims. Pilgrims are people who make a trek or journey – often long and difficult – to visit a place of holy significance in the faith. Christians have long made pilgrimages to various places considered to be a location where Jesus or the Apostles or one of the saints did something significant. The Magi were among the first recorded pilgrims to make such a trek and as strange as they may have been, there have been many other very strange pilgrims. Even today we can be counted among the strange pilgrims.

In one sense for most of us the path to find that holy child, the fount of all goodness and light, was as long and as complex as it was for those foreign astrologers, those 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 we also kneel before the Christ child, offering what we can.

In a different sense, we make a pilgrimage every time we come to join in worship. Most of us by now are quite familiar with the route and the obstacles we must overcome to join together with the other pilgrims to worship God. The same is however not true for visitors and newcomers for whom there is a whole sequence of challenges to get here – finding the building, finding parking, finding the entrance, finding the facilities, finding welcome. With God's help we will find ways to lessen those challenges in the new facilities, but for the moment we can all rejoice that we and our fellow pilgrims have once again gathered here.

But there was more to the story, and like the wise men, and indeed all pilgrims, 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 grace and goodness shine forth in us, and 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 a world threatened by grace and 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 and grace of God in the name of the child born in Bethlehem of Judea, Jesus of Nazareth, even Christ our Lord.