

## Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

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Grace and peace to you from the newborn Christ.

Lest we ever imagine that being a church, being a community that names and claims Jesus as our Lord and Savior, if we ever imagine that it is about anything less than changing lives, in fact *giving life* to a world that is swallowed up, pushed down and led astray by “unlove,” “antilove,” or what we in traditional times called sin or evil, then we are mistaken. The sentimental and moving story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus falls flat if we fail to recognize the reason God came. Which was to save. To love. To change us.

Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is without fanfare. There is no stable, no shepherds, no census, no heavenly choir. There is more attention put to Joseph's dilemma of marrying Mary than there is to Jesus' birth. In just 2 verses (Mtt1:24-25) Matthew wraps up the Christmas story saying, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son and he gave him the name Jesus.”

The next thing we hear, is of this interesting and disturbing encounter between the Magi and Herod. What Matthew is doing here is making connections for his listeners back to the Exodus story. In those days, the Israelite people were enslaved in Egypt, and Pharaoh was the hard core leader who kept them in their place. Matthew recognized that there is always a new “pharaoh” in our lives, always oppression and enslavement and in his day the new pharaoh was Herod. The new Moses was Jesus, who had come to save his people. It's very cool how Matthew's Christmas story pulls the threads of history into his own time to help the people understand both i) the depth of their own domination, ii) to be countered by the liberating presence of God in Christ.

What “pharaohs” do we live under? And do we dare to name them? Or are we, especially we who live in first world circumstances, too satisfied with our own status quo? Perhaps even, we, collectively, have pharaoh-like (or Herod-like) characteristics that keep us in power and prestige while others suffer. These are hard questions that Matthew's gospel brings to the surface – it's why he doesn't spend time on the birth narrative, but gets right into it. He knew there was no time to waste, people were agonizing, even dying under such circumstances. The urgency of his story charts the course for renewal as the theme for his whole gospel.

Renewal is challenging and Matthew decides to inject hope and help by way of the Magi. (Maybe because sometimes we just can't see what is right in front of

us in plain daylight.) Now, there are no Magi in the Exodus story. They are Matthew's creative addition and they are very intentional, even critical additions to clarify the far reaching redemption and love of God. Here, foreigners, outsiders, the unexpected come and worship, bearing gratitude in tangible ways with their gifts. It's fascinating that Matthew, who we understand to be Jewish, introduces Gentiles as some of the first to come to Jesus! In doing so, he sets in place the second theme of his writing – Jesus' story is inclusive!

From the very beginning, God's love and forgiveness has been intended for all. It was God who created all that we know and have (Genesis 1, 2.) God who teaches us about living in community (10 Commandments.) God is the one who showed us how to overcome our faults (King David.) God who stood beside us in times of darkness (captivity of Israel.) God who showed us equality in lifting up women in leadership (woman at the well.) God who affirmed welcome for a wide diversity of genders (Ethiopian Eunuch who was baptized.) God's love has always refused to be contained, restrained, commodified, or held hostage by power or privilege.

Living out Matthew's themes today will necessarily pull the threads of these stories into our own context. As we begin a new year at Holy Spirit could we ponder together how we might take up Matthew's themes for ourselves:

1. Be courageous enough to change. Learn to recognize the face of oppression, inequality, and abusive power in our world – regardless of which side of these things we find ourselves on. Where do we see or in what ways do we act like pharaoh or Herod? Are we willing to God to work in us and change us?
2. Continue to grow into an affirming community that welcomes all; a place that creates space for each of us to encounter Love in one way in here, so that we may each recognize Love out there. It means we take on the work to dismantle fear, upset unfair systems, call out bullying, and replace them with practices, words and attitudes that put the wonder and beauty of God's diverse creation first.
3. Share the joy of God's salvation. In a world that at times seems unaware of the pervasiveness of brokenness, Jesus has come. And we, who know the saving story of Jesus, who have found refuge in the cherished accounts of Abraham, Jonah, Paul, Elizabeth, Zacchaeus, the hemorrhaging woman, Mary, Joseph, Anna, and so many others - we must take the Magi-mantle upon ourselves. Go out, bearing rich gifts like gold, spice and perfume, introduce Jesus, who by the way, is amazing! To put it simply, God came to save us all, but a lot of people don't know it yet! We can help with that.

The Christmas stories give account in blood, sweat, tears, fear, dreams, song, and journeys so that we might find ourselves in the story somewhere. Finding our place the story sinks into our bones, like a part of our own DNA. We are woven

into God's plan and purpose and cannot be lost. And as all the gospel writers discovered and shared in their own unique way, we give thanks that this story is meant for us and if it is for us, then it is for all. Amen.