

Matthew 2:1-12
January 4, 2009

South Plains
Epiphany

Two Kings

King Herod is the villain in the story of the magi. He's not alone, of course. The chief priests and scribes play their part as stooges who can tell the King what he wants to know, that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. But they cannot understand, or else they refuse to understand that the Messiah is the fulfillment of all the hopes of the Judaism they study and serve. Herod is the chief villain. His cruel, conniving tells us right at the beginning of the gospel that Jesus will have enemies. Herod is easy to hate. His stooges are deeply implicated in his guilt.

The magi or wise men are the heroes who point the rest of the world to the Savior. Their openness to the message about the king of the Jews is in stark contrast to the denseness of the paid religious leaders. The travelers' clever way of asking about the new king almost exposes the child to danger. Then, their wisdom comes to the rescue as they avoid Jerusalem and return home by another way. They provide a nice balance to the scheming of Herod. It's easy to like the magi and romanticize their journey.

From our vantage point, it seems that everyone should have welcomed the Messiah. Even as a child, he surely would have been seen as the fulfillment of their

hopes, the very embodiment of love, the ideal of moral, upright living, an example of self-giving and leadership, the source of wisdom and an inspiration for every sincere person.

Nevertheless, Herod did not welcome the news that the Messiah, someone called king of the Jews, had been born. The question I have been turning over in my mind is this. Suppose I had been in Herod's palace when the magi arrived. I would not have been a king, but suppose my study door is where the magi knocked and asked for directions. I might have not too much different from the person I am today, a religious leader with some training in the scriptures and some responsibility for guiding other believers. I wonder what rationale might have led me to turn a blind eye to the good news brought by the birth of the Messiah.

And, so I imagine myself in Herod's palace, hearing about some Gentile strangers who come with news that my king has been born.

Let's be fair about this. The Messiah's coming means I will probably lose some control, some of the religious clout that enables me to interpret the word of God with authority and put my own spin on the meaning of scripture. As the Messiah matures, he will know better than I do what our duty to the Lord requires. It's even quite possible I will no longer be needed. Downsized. At the least, I will not be quite the center of attention anymore.

Despite the fact we are 2000 years distant from the Messiah's birth, we may react to Christmas and Epiphany much as did Herod and his advisors. We put the King of the Jews in a manger where he cannot hurt anyone. We paper over the prophecies with carols and presents that hide the demands of faith. And, we place our hope, not in his kingdom, but in the marketplace which we trust will provide for a good living and a comfortable retirement.

That may be why the season of Advent and the celebration of Epiphany each year often is ho-hum news to those of us who are believers while for strangers from the other side of the world who know nothing of the Bible and little of Christianity Christ's coming is wonderful news, life changing news.

The truth is that the arrival of the Messiah is exactly the tonic we need for the New Year 2009. This particular Christmas season has given many of us the opportunity to confront materialism and greed. We like our comforts and our toys. In some cases we are addicted to things. It takes a trauma like the collapse of the housing market and the fall in stock prices to shake us loose from the belief that we cannot do without our stuff. The arrival of Jesus reminds us that who we love is much more satisfying than what we love.

The coming of this Messiah tells us that we are not in control of events. There are economic and political forces far beyond the regulation of a superpower nation

And, there will be some kind of sacrifice expected on my part. People in this congregation might see no more reason to give if the Messiah has already come. Or, at any rate, they might well suppose I don't need anything. The gold and spices carried by the strangers will go to him, not to me. The comforts and pleasures, well, even the glory of my little position as a mediator between God and humanity, that glory will be diminished.

And what will this Messiah have to say about the broken promises and unresolved resolutions I made for the year gone by? I had good intentions and still do; but I can't seem to get around to everything I set out to accomplish. I don't want to be judged by anybody, and surely not by the Messiah.

All in all, the coming of the Messiah is probably best left where it has been for centuries: a dream, a faraway hope, an ideal we can still strive for, but never see come to pass.

(pause)

If that's what the scribes and chief priests and possibly Herod himself were thinking, they had good reason to hope the magi were wrong. And, if indeed this so-called Messiah was real, Herod needed to get this Messiah and his birthday out of his hair as soon as possible.

and surely beyond the calculations of individual women and men. We need to trust ourselves finally to the Savior of the nations who help is not measured in dollars and whose wisdom exceeds all the information our computers can store.

We are not the center of the world anymore than Herod was the center of God's people. That place is reserved for God and for his Messiah, his Christ. The good news is that we are the center of God's attention. We are so important that when God came, God did not take the guise of a superhero or a prince, but chose instead to be born the child of ordinary, working parents. Wise men hailed his arrival and paid him homage. But, those who are wise only in politics and money matters refused to recognize what God was doing.

Even for the blind and hard of heart, God made provision. Christ died for the sins of the world. All we have to do is accept his forgiveness, no small feat, but acceptance of Christ and his gifts is the best thing we can do to start the year right.

And, so we bring our gifts of bread and cup to the Lord's Table as tokens of our willingness to say, "Yes, Jesus, you are the Christ, the Messiah, the King of the Jews and the King of our lives."