

The Eve of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ  
January 5, 2014  
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## The rest of the story?

Traditionally, for the feast of the Epiphany, we read only the first half of St. Matthew's story of the wise men, Herod and the Holy Family shortly after Jesus' birth. We weave this first part of the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel into St. Luke's nativity story for our Christmas celebrations. The star appears over the stable and the wise men come with their gifts. It makes for a wonderful scene, but it leaves out the rest of the story.

In contrast to Luke, Matthew wants us to know that the birth of the Messiah, "*the King of the Jews,*" brings conflict, a clash between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. We see this first in the third verse, "*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...*" "*Frightened*" is a more powerful word than the one the older translations used, "*troubled.*" In Herod's world there is room for only one King.

According to Matthew, dreams are important for knowing God's will. The story begins in Chapter 1 with Joseph's first dream when God tells him to not be afraid, to take Mary as his wife and to name the baby Jesus.

The wise men dream about Herod's hypocrisy, his paranoia, his evil. So they do not report back to him after finding Jesus. Joseph has three more dreams as the story progresses: first, to seek refuge in Egypt; second, sometime later, to return to Israel after Herod's death; and, finally, to go to Nazareth to live because Judea was not safe.

Joseph is seen as an obedient servant of God, protecting Jesus and Mary from evil and death. Herod's fears lead to enormous evil resulting in death. Matthew introduces us to the "*chief priests and scribes of the people*" who seem to side with Herod, rather than follow the wise men to Bethlehem. The chief priests and scribes know the ancient prophecies, yet fail to follow the word of God, just as 30 years later the chief priests and scribes will conspire with another political leader, Pontius Pilate, to crucify Jesus.

When we examine all 23 verses of Matthew's second chapter we can understand the reality and the call of Jesus' manifestation, his epiphany, to the entire world. This showing forth of God's glory in Christ is first seen in the visit of the wise men, these pagan Gentiles, from the East who have to consult with the Jewish religious leaders for guidance from Holy Scripture because all they have followed is a star.

Jesus birth will change the entire world. This theme concludes for Matthew at the end of his Gospel when the Risen Christ commissions his disciple to go "*and make disciples of all nations, baptize them and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you...*" (28:19)

The rest of the Christmas story is mission – taking the good news of God in Christ out into the world. We have designated this 2013-2014 program year here at Grace Church as a Year of Mission. All we do in our stewardship, in our outreach, in our teaching, in our pastoral care is directed at sharing the good news of God's love in Jesus.

The story of the wise men and their gifts reminds us that, in order to accomplish our mission, we need to first know God's love in Christ. We need to come to Christ and worship him. The newer translations of the Gospel use the word "homage" rather than "worship." Some of our young people in the Christmas Pageant three weeks ago had trouble pronouncing homage. I think some even said "hummus" Hummus is probably more familiar to our children than homage.

To pay homage is literally to prostrate oneself, to bow down, to honor and subject oneself by showing allegiance to the ultimate authority in one's life. Homage is extreme worship – more than kneeling, more than genuflecting. All of our physical acts, all of our words and songs of praise grow from hearts and minds completely devoted to Jesus.

Our worship at Grace Church makes visible our homage to Christ our King, our Savior, our Lord. And our worship supports us, inspires us, to then go out in mission to the world, be it near or far, sharing God's love.

The rest of the story is what we take away from our Christmas and Epiphany celebrations. How will we help Christ's light to shine? How will we manifest Christ's love to those we meet? What mission opportunities will we undertake in 2014?

Last Thursday, my wife, my father-in-law and I visited the White House. My father-in-law spent the last 2½ weeks with us and one visit he wanted to make was to see the inside of the White House. We got passes and had a nice tour. But all the Christmas decorations were gone on the ninth day of the Christmas Season. With all the tradition, with all the beauty, with all the history in the White House, I didn't see anything representing Christmas or Jesus. And I was disappointed, even a little sad!

Afterwards, I walked a few blocks to where our car was parked. Leslie and her Dad waited for me on the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and 15<sup>th</sup> Street, so he didn't have to walk too far. As I walked, I noticed a young woman ahead of me standing in front of an entry way into what appeared to be an abandoned building.

Coming closer I heard her talking and, as I passed by, I realized she was talking to a homeless man, trying to convince him to come with her to a shelter. Snow and freezing temperatures were forecast for later in the day. As I continued to my car and started to drive away, I wondered if the young woman had been able to get the man to leave the abandoned building for the safety and warmth of a shelter. After turning the corner I saw them together walking down the street side-by-side.

*Alleluia. Unto us a child is born.  
O come, let us adore him. Alleluia.*

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-11  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12