

Entering the Mystery

from the pulpit of
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Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations

shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today is Epiphany when we recall the visitation of the magi. Christmas may have come and gone, but these old wise figures from antiquity invite us to continue pondering the unexpected way God became one of us – in the birth of Jesus. They encourage us to enter the mystery of it all.

Diogenes Allen, was professor at Princeton seminary, and made a useful distinction between a problem and a mystery. He said a problem is something to be solved, to be dealt with, to be disposed of. But a mystery is different. “We do not solve mysteries; we enter into them,” he wrote, “The deeper we enter into them, the more illumination we get. Still greater depths are revealed to us the further in we go. In contrast to this, when a problem is solved, it is over and done with. We go on to other problems. But a mystery once recognized is something we are never finished with. Instead we return to it again and again (as we return to Bethlehem every year) and it unfolds new levels of meaning to us.”

This distinction between a problem and a mystery is illuminating when we consider this familiar passage of scripture. The birth of Jesus presents for some, a problem, and for others a profound mystery. Take King Herod, for instance. He got wind of this baby who would be king and he had on his hands a problem to be solved, dealt with and disposed of. Herod asked informational questions – “who... when... where?” He did not ask spiritual questions - such as *why?* and *what is the meaning of this?* But the magi, on the other hand, were in search of more than information. They were stargazers, astrologers by training, people willing to delve into mystery. The stars speak of majesty; the stars convey mystery; and the stars seem like tiny points of certainty in the vast unknown.

The Magi looked to the rhythms and the patterns of the stars and planets in their orbits as their guides. They were the kind of people who asked: *why* and *what is the meaning of this?* So – while the magi sought the mystery, Herod dealt with Jesus - like a problem. Feeling threatened at the news of the baby born King of the Jews he did what frightened

people do - he rallied the troops to solve the problem. He called in the chief priests and scribes and started asking questions. In so doing, he spread his fear around all Jerusalem, Matthew tells us. He let out enough information to share the fright, then he did what people with problems often do, he worked in secret. He summoned the magi to himself, asked his “who... when... where” questions, and then he sent them on a mission without full disclosure of his intentions. Historians recall Herod was unusually cruel, but he may have been responding as any astute political leader might.

After all, the birth of a newborn king, to him - had to be perceived as a matter of national security. Thus the edict mandating the murder of all the children who might be around Jesus’ age. It would have been expensive, to be sure, but it covered the bases and allowed him to move on to other problems. So while Herod tried to solve his problem, the magi, went journeying into the mystery, using a light in the sky as a compass and bowing in the awe and reverence due the tiny one they found.

The Magi's stop in Bethlehem was marked by great joy; they paid the infant Jesus homage, which means the public display of worship. And they brought gifts, gifts that fulfilled the ancient prophecy of honoring royalty: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, expensive gifts suitable for a king. They never got back in touch with Herod, the problem solver; their worship seems to have changed them, and they left for their own country by another road.

While this story gives us two contrasting portraits of people on a quest, we have to be careful in drawing parallels to our own experience, because the truth is that each one of us is part-magi, and each one of us has a little Herod in us, too. Because for all of us Jesus is actually both a problem and a mystery. For most of us, at least some of the time, Jesus is a problem – because he grows up and commands us to love beyond measure, to put the poor first, to forgive seventy-times-seven, to turn the other cheek, to welcome the stranger, all with the intention that we

might join him in ushering in the Kingdom of God. It's hard work – it's often nearly impossible work. But here in the beginning of the gospel Matthew's story of the Magi helps us imagine how we might enter into the mystery of God's in-breaking kingdom, and take that other road in the footsteps of Jesus rather than down the cruel pathways of Herod. You see – the Magi and Herod together remind us that we can choose our response to the newborn king.

We can choose to follow him down the rough roads of discipleship, or not. We can choose to receive him as the Light of the World, or walk around with our own little flashlights providing limited illumination. We can seek only certainty, with simplistic answers to difficult questions, or we can journey into the mystery that Christ himself is God incarnate, alive among us.

I think the Magi give us a clue as to how to make the right choice. For if, like them, we begin in worship, by kneeling before the baby in Bethlehem, by paying him homage, by entering the mystery of divine goodness then we may become less like Herod, and more like the Magi who find their true home in Christ himself. I pray that as we enter this New Year together we will join the Magi who lead us to the mystery of God wrapped in human flesh, and that our worship before him will strengthen us to walk in his pathways of God's goodness, mercy and love.

Our earliest Christmas Eve worship service is a thing to behold. With Pastor Rachel's leadership of our children's ministry, and Edward leading their choirs, the number participating has grown to include well over a hundred children and youth. I want to tell you a story about a holy moment at the end of the pageant last year, but first know that I have permission to tell it from the family involved. With the older children providing the narration of the Nativity and the younger children creating a visual tableau by assuming the parts, the pastors have little to say.

I typically offer a Welcome on behalf of the congregation at the beginning of the service, and then serve as a sort of stagehand up here behind the pulpit. Pastor Rebecca manages the shepherds on the other side of the Holy Family, and I oversee the kings, their entourage and the angels on my side. In a word, for 45 minutes of the year we become the church mothers. We hold in hand an extra copy of the script in case there is need; we try to prevent battery-operated candles from entering into sword fights, and the like.

A year ago, Rachel lost her voice right before Christmas. She says now, smiling, it was from raising her voice during all those pageant rehearsals. On Christmas Eve, it meant the rest of us had to divvy up her parts. So in addition to the Welcome at the family service, I was also to pronounce Rachel's Benediction. Well, after the arrival of the Star carrier and the child carrying the Tail of the Star, and the Kings and their entourage carrying baskets filled with gifts, and the heavenly host of angels there was nothing between the chair where I was sitting and the pulpit where I was to deliver the benediction but a sea of children. With no room to walk, I had a problem.

Then a mother, crawled up the steps squeezing between the wall and the children, and whispered, "My son missed saying his line, he practiced all week, he's very upset, is there any way you can fit him in?" It turns out he had been moving toward a microphone to say his one line, but the narrator may have been confused by the pause, and kept on going so he missed the chance to deliver his line. But at his mother's request for a second chance to say his line in the service, I began to figure out how to solve my problem, and I struck a bargain. I said, "If you can help me create a path through these children to the pulpit, he can say his line right before the Benediction.

All I knew was – he was a first grader King, but I had no idea what his line was! During the singing of Silent Night, up between the pulpit and me, his mother gently and quietly parted the sea of children, created the pathway, and I walked to the pulpit, lowered the microphone

as low as I could so the little six-year-old King on tip toe could offer his line and he said boldly: “We have come to pay him homage.” And we had, of course. It was the summary of the whole service; it was the joy and wonder of Christmas Eve, of Christmas Day.

It is the mystery of today’s worship on Epiphany. “We have come to pay him homage.” You know, sometimes we have to ask the Herod questions – *who... what... where...* and go about spending our days wrestling with problems to be solved. And we – like little children - often miss our lines. But the grace of the gospel is that these Magi invite us to enter a mystery – and to follow the spiritual questions of – *how.... and what is the meaning of this?* And then strengthened by our worship before God becoming human in Jesus Christ we will be led to far more beautiful places of goodness, mercy and love than we can imagine.

Now is the time on Epiphany to leave Bethlehem and journey forward by another road.

AMEN.