

December 20, 2020 – St. Andrew's (Sarnia)

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, ² asking, "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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They 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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then 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." ⁹ When 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Word of the Lord | Thanks be to God

Message: Rumours

A few weeks back, I came across an article in an online newspaper about nativity scenes, which eventually led me down an internet rabbit hole of all sorts of different nativities, both wonderful and weird.

There are many variations on the nativity scene idea that would be familiar to most of us:

beautiful carved wood, colourfully-painted ceramics, even knitted or sewn versions that are charming.

Nativity scenes come in all shapes and sizes, too, from ornament-sized to life-size or larger.

They had all the usual characters, lovingly made, whatever the medium.

But I found some other ones that I wasn't too sure about.

Like the one where all the people were re-imagined as fluffy yellow chicks;

or the one inside the belly of a large ceramic frog;

or most confusingly the one with Santa

swaddling the baby Jesus
 instead of his mother...
 ...not sure what sort of
 message that one's trying
 to convey!

The most famous unusual nativity is probably
 from the 2003 Christmas film, Love Actually
 – it's a living nativity play with the children.
 The usual characters are there:
 Mary and Joseph, Jesus,
 the shepherds and some farm animals,
 and the Magi.
 But there's also a small green octopus
 and a trio of lobsters, off to the side.
 And while it's cute, because it's kids,
 my gut reaction lands somewhere in the midst of
 amused, confused and a little disappointed.

We've spent the past few Sundays immersing ourselves
 in the stories of Christmas:
 Isaiah's long-ago prophecy of a child born for us,
 Mary and Joseph's belief and action,
 the shepherds fear and joy.

And this week, days away from Christmas proper,
 we're rounding out the nativity scene with the Magi or wisemen.
 They flit in and out of our nativity story very quickly;
 yet with just a few brief words,
 a whole story and rich tradition
 of art and poetry and song
 has emerged.
 The fine robes, the rich gifts,
 the empty desert landscape lit only by a star,
 endless sand broken only
 by a thin trail of hoof-prints and three shadowy figures,
 journeying on.
 There's a romance to the Magi,
 and modern scholars have spent
 considerable effort teasing out
 what fact there is behind the legend.

The Magi were members of an ancient Persian clan,
 specialising in religious and scientific activities.

They were neither kings nor wise men.
 Maybe they earned the title wise men
 because of their skills in interpreting dreams
 and understanding astrology;
 as a clan, the magi were well known
 for telling fortunes
 and preparing daily horoscopes,
 and astrology was
 internationally regarded
 as an important branch of science back then.

By this point in history, the magi were most likely
 followers of Zoroastrianism,
 the major religion of Persia then,
 which is still practiced in parts of Iran, even today.
 Zoroastrian priests believed
 that they could foretell miraculous births
 by reading the stars,
 and like the Jews,
 their own religion led them
 to anticipate the birth
 of a true Saviour.

So these Magi were scientists who studied the stars;
 they were devout practitioners of another religion,
 and they were citizens of an empire
 with which Israel had a long and violent history.

Can you imagine Mary and Joseph's gut reaction
 when this lot turned up uninvited?
 Persian scientists, men of the empire of Israel's old enemies,
 priests of Zoroaster...
 ...maybe the trio of lobsters and the little green octopus
 are not so misplaced after all!

These Magi are unlikely,
 even shocking, people to add to our nativity scenes,
 when we realise just who they are.
 But what is even more shocking,
 what makes their presence even more surprising,
 is the realization that if they are there,
 seeking Jesus,
 then they are part of the "us."
 If Jesus is indeed Emmanuel,

and Emmanuel is God-with-us,
 then these Zoroastrian scientist-priests
 are part of the “us”
 that God came in Christ to be with.

If you’ve been following along with our Advent Daily Devotional,
 then you’ll have read about chapter one
 of the Gospel of Matthew yesterday.
 If you skimmed over the actual Scripture reading,
 I wouldn’t blame you;

Matthew 1 is the family tree of Jesus,
 starting with Abraham to David,
 to the last king before the exile,
 to Joseph’s father.
 It’s full of names,
 both familiar and tongue-twisty.

But it’s important to note it,
 because this family tree is the opening salvo
 of an extraordinary argument
 that Matthew makes
 over the entirety of his gospel.

Jesus’ family tree includes some unlikely, even shocking names.
 There’s the four foreign-born women,
 Rahab and Ruth, Bathsheba and Tamar.
 There’s the unfaithful king Ahaz who rejected God;
 there are kings-in-exile,
 rulers of God’s people without throne
 or power or purpose.

And even David – a good king –
 had done some bad things,
 including assaulting a woman and arranging for a murder.

Opening with this family tree
 is Matthew’s none-too-subtle way
 of reminding his mostly Jewish readers
 that the family that produced Jesus,
 the Saviour and Son of God,
 had been far more diverse
 than most people wanted to admit,

and that there were plenty of
skeletons in the family closet.

The next thing Matthew does is explain
how Jesus became grafted onto this family tree
through his earthly father Joseph.

And then he reminds everyone
about Isaiah's ancient prophecy:

"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son,
and they will call him Immanuel"
(which means "God with us").

Matthew then immediately jumps ahead in time
to open his second chapter with a primer on just who the "us"
with whom God would be was.

And it includes a group of Zoroastrian astrologers
from Baghdad.

When you round up all the men and women involved
in welcoming the newborn Jesus into the world,
it's pretty eclectic bunch.

Elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah and their wild son, John;
Mary and Joseph, the intrepid and faithful young couple,
flouting tradition and the law;
and the shepherds,
among the least important in Jewish culture,
scared but willing to travel through the dark,
seeking Jesus.

And now these Magi with their strange science and religion,
led across desert and mountain, seeking a king.

The good news of great joy for all the people
– grace recognised as coming into the world –
really is for everyone!

Men and women, high and low,
foreigners and family:
the "all" and the "us" are big.

And God shares that good news with all those people
in different ways:

to Elizabeth and Zechariah, Joseph and Mary by angel-messenger,
to shepherds through angels on Christmas eve,
to the Magi via a star on Epiphany,

and to the political and religious authorities
of God's own people
through visitors from the East.

God is ready to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people.
From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth,
God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus,
gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

An "us" that includes everyone,
great joy for all, good news for all...
...though not, it seems for Herod and his chief priests and scribes.
We'll talk more about Herod in a couple of weeks, in January.
He had his own reasons for not being too pleased about Jesus.
But let's reflect for a moment on the priests and the scribes.

A Christian philosopher from a couple of centuries ago
wrote this about the scribes and the Magi:
"What a difference! The three kings – the Magi – had only a rumour to go by.
But it moved them to make that long journey.
The scribes were much better informed, much better versed.
They sat and studied the Scriptures like so many [scholars],
but it did not make them move.
Who had the more truth?
The three kings who followed a rumour
or the scribes who remained sitting with all their knowledge?
What a vexation it must have been for the kings,
that the scribes who gave them the news they wanted
remained quiet in Jerusalem!"

Here's the thing:
God's embrace is big enough and wide enough for the whole world,
and everyone is part of the "us" and the "all;"
Jesus came to save everyone
and everyone is welcome into his gracious embrace.
But not everyone moves into that embrace.
It's not nice to think of;
we hope that everyone who hears the good news
would be moved by it,
would accept it and want it for themselves.
But not everyone does.

I think that's why we usually push Herod and his scribes to after Christmas,

because they take a little of the beauty from our nativity scene.
 How would we put them in,
 amongst the shepherds and sheep,
 the Magi and their camels,
 the angel and the holy family?

What would a chief priest and scribe figurine look like; or Herod, the king?
 A few dark figures, perhaps, standing at the edge of the scene,
 hands over ears and eyes shut?
 A man with a crown,
 back resolutely turned to the manger?

The lobsters and the little green octopus
 would be more welcome than those sad, angry figures!

Everyone else in our Christmas Scriptures heard the good news and moved.
 They immediately re-oriented their lives and headed straight for Jesus,
 seeking him across months of pregnancy and worry
 and a mandated trip to Bethlehem,
 down a dark and treacherous path
 swiftly travelled in the middle of the night,
 for months and months,
 persistently and methodically,
 across international borders,
 deserts, and mountainous terrain.

Even Isaiah, prophesying so long ago
 about a child born for us;
 even Isaiah continued to prophesy and proclaim
 the coming Saviour-King,
 turning God's people again and again,
 moving them toward hope.
 Everybody moved.
 But not the scribes.
 They knew all about the Saviour,
 right down to the little non-descript village
 he'd be born in...knew it immediately, it seems,
 as soon as Herod asked.

And when the opportunity came to at least
 investigate the claims these well-respected foreign scientists
 were making...
 ...the scribes did nothing.
 They did nothing.

Why?

We don't know, so we have to guess.
 Everyone was scared of Herod, so maybe he made them do nothing.
 Maybe they were unhappy about these fancy foreign scientists
 coming to tell them their own business.
 Maybe they were hurt or offended,
 because God was telling his own priests and scribes
 about *their* Saviour by means of these
 other, non-Jewish outsiders.

Maybe they wanted God to work their way,
 through a means and method that was familiar to them,
 to bring salvation into the world;
 perhaps through the long-used tools of Temple and priest,
 liturgy and synagogue.

But really, we don't know why;
 we only know that the scribes knew all *about* God...
 ...and didn't *know* God at all.
 And they didn't seek Jesus.

Imagine that you knew exactly where to go to see Jesus,
 an actual physical location,
 that it was just in the next town over...
 ...would you go?
 What might keep you from moving, too?

When we read the story of the Magi at Christmas,
 it packages the entire Christmas story up with a beautiful bow.
 Jesus was born safely in Bethlehem
 and after the angels and the shepherds and the animals
 appeared at the manger,
 three scholarly men from the east
 journeyed to him to pay him homage
 and give him gifts of
 gold, frankincense and myrrh.
 Our nativity scene is complete!

The reality of the story was not wrapped up quite so perfectly.
 Because as amazing and wonderful as it is
 that the "us" in God with us is big enough
 to include these foreign Zoroastrian scientists

alongside you and I and every faithful believer...

...we can't forget

those shadowed, unwanted figures

of the scribes and chief priests,

resolutely stood well-back

from the manger,

resolutely refusing

to move.

The "us" includes them, too;

those people who haven't quite managed

to bring themselves to seek Jesus

even a little bit,

like those of us here or watching on TV

or listening online today.

And the "us" includes Herod, too, as he moves...

...away from the manger.

God's grace and mercy mean

that we can't kick these lost and fearful people out

of our nativity scene.

But you know, we can add ourselves in, too,

strangely dressed as we would be in our 21st century clothes,

foreigners with an incomprehensible language.

Because I assure you that even though we are not

mounting camels and following a star to Bethlehem,

we are still very much seeking Jesus in our lives.

We very much *need* to keep seeking Jesus,

to keep moving forward in faith toward him,

no matter how difficult the journey,

how treacherous the path,

how far we have to go.

I've broken convention a bit

by having the Magi arrive at the manger

before our Christmas celebration this year.

But if ever there was a Christmas when all of us

need to be seeking Jesus,

when all of us need to move toward the manger,

toward the hope, peace, joy and love of God

that the manger offers to us –

it's this Christmas.

For generations upon generations,

we have been promised light in the midst of darkness,
hope in the midst of despair,
peace in the midst of suffering,
joy in the midst of sorrow,
love in the midst of fear.

And God has not walked away from that promise.
But you know, it's always dark out
when we've got our eyes shut.
So this Christmas, let yourself be moved
by the certainty that the "us" in God with us
includes you, too;
and let's open our eyes
and move forward in faith,
seeking Jesus.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.