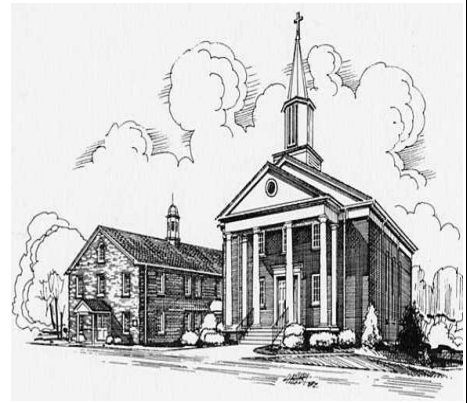


The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the

Second Sunday after Christmas
All Years

Psalm 84:1-8

Matthew 2:1-12



The Collect

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

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, 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.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘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.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had ap-

peared. 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.” 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON

The stories we tell during the Twelve days of Christmas are so familiar, so full of wonderful childhood memories, that I sometimes wonder if we hear them anymore at all. We “know” the Christmas story from Annunciation to Epiphany so well that it's hard to steer our concentration to the stories themselves and away from our traditions and the pressing obligations of the holidays. That's the problem with attaching important stories to busy times of the year. We get distracted. We need to hear the stories anew. We need to pour our attention onto these stories and drink them up again.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Of course, the first thing we notice is that there were “wise men”, not “kings” and not “three wise men”. There could have been two. There could have been twenty. We say three wise men because they left three gifts, but that's not determinate. Maybe one wise man brought all three gifts, and the rest were just tourists. Who knows? Whether there were three or thirty isn't important. What is important is that something happened “in the east” (Babylon would be a good guess) that caused some very important and wealthy people to make an arduous journey over some very rough country. Not following a star as we always imagine it, but moving away from it. They saw the star “at its rising” in the east, then they traveled to the west. It is Jesus which draws them, not direction from a star. The star performs the same task as the angels in Luke’s account. The star merely announces. It is Jesus who draws.

The story of Jesus motivates people to do things, even unpleasant, arduous things like climbing on a camel and riding some 500 miles, a journey of perhaps fifty days. That is mighty strange behavior for wise men! We need something other than curiosity to explain so long and difficult a trip.

The timing of the visitations are another thing we run together. We put the shepherds and the “three kings” on top of the television (or we did when televisions weren't flat screens) as if they all arrived in one night. They didn't. Luke's story and Matthew's have to be read individually – giving each one its dignity. Due to the distance traveled, the wise men must have gotten to Bethlehem a month or two after the birth. That's why they found the family in a house, rather than a stable. Time had passed. That's important, for that time gave them an opportunity for reflection, and there would

have been a lot to reflect upon. Think about the mechanics of such a trip at such a time. A month or two on a camel, making maybe 20 miles a day. Lots of time to gripe and complain. Lots of time to regret a decision perhaps made in haste in Babylon to go chasing after this sign in the heavens, but they didn't turn back. These wealthy and influential Babylonian astrologers were in it for the long haul. Whatever happened in Babylon was so forceful that they were convinced to willingly suffer the rigors of the trip. That's amazing to me. Before you saved me from myself by demanding that I pay attention to Sunday, many's the Sunday I woke up, thought about going to church then rolled over and went back to sleep. These guys woke early and got on a camel, one of the most ill-tempered beasts on the planet, then rode all day! What would motivate them to do such a thing? What could they have seen in

the east?

There has been a lot of nonsense written about what the wise men might have seen in the east, comets or alignments of planets, but like the number of wise men, what they saw is not important. What IS important is what they DID. They inconvenienced themselves by doing a hard thing of no obvious benefit to themselves. They went to a lot of trouble, even gaining an audience with Herod, expecting to pay homage to a king, only to finally visit a child living in very un-kinglike circumstances. Yet despite all that, when they found the child they remained so unshakably convinced by what they had seen that they left a great pile of booty behind. How come? The story of Jesus causes people to do unexpected things, if you truly hear it. If you no longer hear it, if it has become a comfortable tradition, it is powerless to move you. That's why we must discipline ourselves to

hear properly.

This power to move people into action is not something that everybody welcomes gladly. One such person was Herod.

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Why would Herod be frightened? I think I can answer that from my own experience. I used to be important, remember? When I came into a room, people took off their hats! The last thing in the world I would have welcomed would be the coming of someone more important. The last thing Herod would have welcomed was Messiah because Herod's idea of Messiah was markedly different from ours.

The future Jewish Messiah to come is

thought to be a human leader, physically descended from the paternal Davidic line through King David and King Solomon. He is thought to accomplish predetermined things in only one future arrival, including the unification of the tribes of Israel, the gathering in of all Jews to Eretz Israel, the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the ushering in of a Messianic Age of global universal peace, and the annunciation of the World to Come.¹

Now, I ask you: if you were Herod, would the report of the visitors from Babylon have sounded like good news to you? Of course he was frightened! His idea, the idea shared by all the people of the time, was not of a savior who is Christ the Lord, but of a human leader who would sweep out the bus and take over. That's why it is important to really hear the birth stories. This Jesus isn't who you would make him out to be in your traditions. He is something completely unexpected.

¹ Wikipedia

Herod reacted to this perceived threat just as you would think: he plotted.

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.”

It's convenient for us to think about Herod as the villain of the piece, and, indeed, history informs us that he was a thoroughly nasty piece of work, but that's also unimportant. As uncomfortable as it is for me to say this, Herod's role is to stand in for us in this story. Like each of us, he is quick to create good reasons to do bad things, particularly if they can be characterized as self-defense. Herod isn't the villain of the piece; we are! Why else would we need a Savior? Each time we congratulate ourselves on what decent people we are, how

righteous and high minded, we deny our need for a Savior. Every time we confess that we have done wrong, but cage that confession by thinking “But not as wrong as that guy over there”, we slip into Herod’s shoes. That discomfort you are feeling right now over what I just said is why we want to domesticate this story into a table-top creche with a non-frightening baby in a manger, and a suspiciously European looking cast of mother, Joseph and the kings. If we really want to hear the stories of the birth, we have to face up to our complicity in the troubled world in which we live. We need to recognize that part of Herod which lives within each of us. We need to confess it, then move on in faith. As our announcements put it this week:

The wise men followed even though it seemed foolish. They wanted to see Jesus more than they wanted to keep their treasures, more than they wanted to play it safe,

and more than they feared the difficulties of the journey.

The Christian faith is not a set of beliefs, but a willingness to travel, to pursue God's gentle light. Christianity is not a place to stand, but a direction in which to move. God invites us to follow the star.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

In his book, *Faces of Jesus*, Frederick Buechner wrote:

“Whether he was born in 4 B.C. or A.D. 6 in Bethlehem or Nazareth, whether there were multitudes of the heavenly host to hymn the glory of it or just Mary and her husband—when the child was born, the whole course of human history was changed. That is a truth as unassailable as any truth. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions and Western man’s whole understanding of himself and his world—it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did.”²

Until we meet again, may the Lord bless you, and keep you. May the Lord lift His countenance upon you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you, and give you peace.

² ‘*The Faces of Jesus*’ Frederick Buechner

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2015 J. Stewart Schneider
