

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
Epiphany Sunday
January 6, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 60:1–6

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Matthew 2:1–12 NRSV

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 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.”

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.

Camels and Myrrh

There was a time when most of us were a little younger. For some of us, the memories and events tied to our youth keep **slipping away**, year by year, but I think most of us can tap back into it without much difficulty. Not surprisingly, a lot of childhood memories are tied to the season of Christmas. For the most part, we look back fondly on these. In this nostalgic tendency, you may be like me and maintain certain rituals on the night before Christmas. This was reading “The Night Before Christmas” when our children were young, followed by “It’s a Wonderful Life” as they grew into their teens. For the past ten years or more, you find me seeking out a cable channel for TNT or TBS on the night before Christmas, in order to catch a portion of the 24-hour marathon of “A Christmas Story.”

Despite repeated viewing, I really enjoy taking in the Christmas memories of Ralphie, the main character of the now cult-classic movie. This originally was made for television viewing in 1983 by an upstart company known as HBO. Playing off myth and holiday traditions, this whacky story of an eccentric family provides 90 minutes of entertainment filled with sight gags and one-liners. Written and narrated by the late Jean Shepherd, and wonderfully acted by the young Peter Billingsley and my favorite, Darren McGavin, the story holds fascination for young and old alike.

In view of my fondness for this particular form of holiday entertainment, I have come to realize that whatever **memories** I have of Christmas as a child are now likely altered by my repeated viewing of this movie, “A Christmas Story.” Then, I recalled that experts, who study memory and our processing of it, tell us that we filter, shift, and **edit** our memories over time. Probably because of the skilled presentation of those who made the movie, I likely have altered some of my own Christmas memories. There are reasons for this.

In this story, the writer, Mr. Shepherd, provides the voice-over description of the action as a **narrator**, using an adult filter to describe the events in a running commentary. This method of narrated presentation as **memory** might be familiar to some of us now with other television comedies: “The Wonder Years” and, more recently, “The Goldbergs.” Regardless, as we move into the New Year, very likely we will carry some of the memories of “Christmas Present” and “Christmas Past” into the upcoming first days of 2019.

Keeping all of this in mind, I believe the church calendar is trying to help us retain our memory of the **events of Christmas** in a similar way. By continuing this time of **Christmastide** to follow Christmas Day, we complete these **Twelve Days of Christmas** with **Epiphany** on January 6th each year. This had significance in the medieval church when well-to-do persons **exchanged gifts** throughout the Twelve Days, as the old carol reminds us. And, there is a legacy today in countries with Spanish heritage, as the gift-giving is typically postponed until the **Night of the Kings**, that is, the night before Epiphany, when children leave their shoes at the doorstep, finding them filled with goodies by **the magi** who, apparently, are still traveling.

As I introduced earlier, we all have a tendency to merge all the threads and story lines of the **birth of Jesus** as they are found in the gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*. In our scripture lesson today, the birth has taken place, and the story shifts to events that follow the birth of Christ. In the *Gospel of Luke*, the actions of Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus center on the ritual of circumcision at the **temple** and an encounter with devoted servants of the temple, **Simeon and Anna** who proclaim the arrival of God’s **Anointed One**.

But, the *Gospel of Matthew* has another, different purpose. There is emphasis on portions of the **Hebrew scriptures**, but they center around the **activity** of God amongst the people of Israel. In this context, the story of Jesus as an infant extends over weeks and months. Following the **visit of the Magi**, Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus travel all the way into **Egypt** and then return in order to escape the murderous intent of the **King Herod**, which is part of the aftermath of the visit of the Magi, which we just read in our scripture lesson.

If any of this sounds familiar, it should, because in the *Book of Exodus*, the **Pharaoh** of Egypt was intentionally killing the infant male children of the slaves known as the **people of Israel**, all of whom were living within the borders of Egypt in the land of Goshen. In *Exodus*, the infant Moses is saved by quick-thinking midwives and the clever mother and sister of Moses, leading to a baby in a basket and a nearly miraculous **rescue** by Pharaoh's own daughter.

With this echoing in the background for Jewish listeners, the stories found in the *Gospel of Matthew* tell us that the infant Jesus was saved by the **insights of God** which are told to the Sacred Family through messengers, which our English translates as angels from the Greek text. Believe me, angels as messengers are intimidating sights throughout the Bible. Being forewarned, the young family takes off for Egypt. Eventually, the three fugitives make their way out of Egypt, returning to the Promised Land settling in **Nazareth** in Galilee, formerly known as **Canaan**.

So, if I put any one of you on the spot and asked you to summarize **the birth narrative** of Jesus you would be like me and **leave out** whole portions of the narrative. But, no matter how you and I recall the story of Christmas, we have to say that the writer of the *Gospel of Matthew* is intent on **another message** for us that has nothing to do with **historical accuracy** or timelines, which fascinates so many today. The writer wants us to pay attention to the **Hebrew scriptures** which have preceded this story by several hundred, if not a **thousand years**.

A 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

Isaiah 60:6 NRSV

Of course, this sounds very much like the events that transpire in *Matthew* with the **Magi** appearing from the East before **the Holy Family** of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. The impetus is the same: that **the Messiah** will be **recognized** by those outside Israel: **Gentile** nonbelievers from as far away as Midian in the Arab peninsula (modern Saudi Arabia) and Sheba (in Africa near modern Ethiopia). These **Magi** are important, educated people, who are bringing **tribute** of expensive gifts, to this person whom they recognize as the **Anointed of God**. And, we find the writer of *Matthew* weaves familiar texts from **the prophet Isaiah** into a new phase of this story about this special person in human history: **Jesus Christ**. The writer imbeds familiar material for the intended audience of this gospel: the Jewish people and others who are familiar with the Hebrew scriptures.

And so, the language and the images of the **great prophets**, such as Isaiah, are captured and altered as part of a **new story**. In our scripture lesson, the Magi come from a generic area "from the East": beyond even Midian which is mentioned in *Isaiah*. We should know that "the East" is not unknown territory for those many merchants and residents in Palestine. Commerce traveled along the **Silk Road**, which stretched across Israel and Canaan, a path for commerce for over a thousand years prior to the birth of Jesus. Caravans brought dry goods, such as silk and spices, and other exotic items from India, **China**, Burma, and Persia to Egypt and Eastern and Southern **Europe**.

The writer of *Matthew* wants us to know that all of these **Gentile** people, these non-Jews, are hungry for **spiritual food**, something beyond these material goods and possessions. They have been looking for the Anointed One, the Messiah, for a long time. Realizing that something momentous has happened, these **magi**, people of great knowledge brought **three gifts**. But, the text places no number on the attending Magi: so it could have been **two** or twenty or **twelve**.

That detail really doesn't matter to the writer of *Matthew*, and it really should not matter to us, either. We still see the traditional "Three Kings" as a legacy of this amazing event in our carols and hymns. But, we also are familiar with the story through works of **art** which depict this scene, the Adoration of the Magi, consistently showing **camels** in attendance. This is not unexpected, since they would be the **animal of choice** for such rugged terrain and transporting people and goods. But, notice that they are mentioned specifically in the lesson from *Isaiah*, and **not mentioned** at all in the gospel message from *Matthew*.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah....

Isaiah 60:6a NRSV

In place of the **camels** as gifts in *Isaiah*, the author of *Matthew* provides us with a **substitute**: the scented aromatic resin, **myrrh**. This was an expensive commodity typically used in Palestine and Egypt for the **preparation of the dead** after their ritual washing and cleansing, before burial in a **sealed tomb**. Here in the second chapter of the *Gospel of Matthew*, the writer gives us an intentional reminder of **the fate** that awaits **the infant Jesus**. He is saved from the sword of Herod's soldiers, but he cannot escape **the fate of the cross**, a death that was foreordained by God for **our salvation**. For those who recognize the subtle aspects of this story, it produces bittersweet thoughts of **love and sacrifice** that are inevitably intertwined into the Christmas story: the **Messiah has come**, but at a very **high cost**.

And, these are the enduring thoughts that should **transport** us all past memories of family and packages and meals and laughter, and all the rest that goes with this momentous holiday and religious festival which we call Christmas. The story of the **Christ child** is the **beginning** of the **gospel** message that ends at **the cross** and an **empty tomb**, bringing the very Good News of our undeserved **salvation**.

You see, thanks to the Magi and Epiphany, we never get very far from the **death and resurrection** of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, even in the **story of Christmas**. Because of that, there is a unique purpose in **Epiphany**. In some cultures, it marks a distinct time for gift giving. But, today the Magi continue to bring us news of the ultimate **purpose** in the **birth** of Jesus Christ. He comes to us: a **gift** from God. But, Jesus must undergo personal sacrifice, death, and burial. Among the gifts of **gold** and **frankincense**, the more costly gift was the **life of Jesus**; and, his sacrifice is represented in the final gift of **myrrh**.

This is the most important part of Christmas, for it brings the **Good News** of the resurrection- and our **salvation**.