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**Matthew 2:1-12**

2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

2:2 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."

2:3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

2:4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

2:5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

2:6 '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.'"

2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

2:8 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."

2:9 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.

2:10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

2:11 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.

2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

<sup>13</sup> Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph<sup>[i]</sup> got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, <sup>15</sup> and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son." <sup>16</sup> When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men,<sup>[i]</sup> he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

**Proclamation of the Word**

If you are like me, the Christmas decorations have all been packed away at home. I know Christmas is 12 days culminating on January 6 with Epiphany, the day we recall the magi and their visit to the baby

Jesus. I know that. But I also know I had time off last week and that was when I could get it done. Otherwise we would have a tree up until late January when we found a "free" day. And actually, my children were available to help haul, pack, and store. But today our text will not let us run right into 2017 without pausing for a moment more at the cradle of the One born under a star in Bethlehem.

But this scripture is not the warm and fuzzy Luke's telling of the Birth of Jesus. In Matthew there are no poor Shepherds and no angel birth announcements. Matthew tells us about Joseph and his dreams, stars, and Magi from the East, a new Sun rising in the East. This is why we sing, "Hail the Sun of righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings." (*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*) Gospel writer John reminds us, "In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." (John 1:4-5) No wonder a star would lead us to the Light of the World.

But the story gets darker and darker. Luke tells us a more PG version. Matthew goes Rated R, the adult version of the birth of Jesus. We hear how Herod plots. We know that the magi were pawns in a power struggle. The King of the Jews was born. Herod is enraged and afraid. We hear that Herod will kill all the innocents, and that the holy family will flee like refugees to Egypt. Oh, we are no longer at the Family Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. This is a text of terror. This is more like "Game of Thrones" than a Hallmark movie.

Into this kind of world the Light shines in the darkness. And the good Lord knows we could use more light in this world. As we turn the page today to a new year, many I have spoken with are saying, "Good riddance 2016. We need to hit the reset button."

We know that 2016 was one of the darker and more difficult years in recent memory. So many shootings. So much terror. So much unrest and division and tension. A brief string of place-names – Orlando, Dallas, Nice, Brussels, Townville, Aleppo, Berlin, and last night, Istanbul– calls to mind some of the violence and terror of the past year. Those of us who follow Jesus, have some work to do.

Some people do not feel safe in their neighborhoods anymore. I heard from a woman who is Jewish. Her uncle fought in WWII under Patton. Because he spoke Hebrew and Yiddish, he was a translator for Eisenhower in one of the concentration camps that was liberated. He was the first to enter the camp to speak to the prisoners and to learn their stories. Yet this war hero has advised his niece to take down her mezuzah from the outside of her front door. The mezuzah is an ancient practice of writing the words of Scripture on the doorposts of your home, particularly the verses that declare that God is One and the *Shema*- which sums up the Law- "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, and strength." (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21) Yet, this man does not feel safe in 2017 displaying his Jewish-ness and advised his family to remove their mezuzahs from their doors.

So maybe Matthew's telling of the Christmas story is more realistic, more honest.

For terror and sin still have power in this world which is why we need a Savior, which is why we need *Emmanuel*, God-with-us, more than ever. The Baby Jesus we meet at the manger is not exempt from the fear, violence, and horrors of our fallen and broken world, but **enters into it** so that we can know that God's full-on embrace of the most difficult parts of our story. God is totally committed to this world and to us. Matthew declares to us that not only is the world fallen, but also so very beloved by God.

Frederick Beuchner puts it this way, "The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. "

God enters into our humanity- in all its messiness and brings light and life to our darkness. God-WITH-us is also God-FOR-us.

This is why Herod cannot win, never will. Herod uses fear and conniving to keep his grip on power. By contrast the Lord of Life comes in love. Herod only knows insecurity. He is so afraid of not having control, of not having all the power and privilege of his position, that he becomes a murderer. Fear does terrible things to people. Herod was known for killing his own sons whom he felt threatened his position. The Caesar said it was better to be a pig than Herod's son. Herod's own home was a slaughterhouse. Fear does terrible things to people. Herod was afraid he would lose his throne, that if anyone else had any power, he had none. His fear was irrational.

And it is into our reality that Jesus comes. Over and over again, Jesus comes to be good news, our light in the darkness. He enters our pain, our vulnerable lives, and gives us second birth. So we are called like him to resist evil and its power in the world, to bring salt to season and light to illuminate.

But back to the magi...

First things first, like the magi we come to kneel at the cradle so that we might be raised with him through the cross. We humbly kneel and worship this Christ child, our Messiah. Then we offer our gifts, ourselves in service.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is said to be THE place of Jesus' birth. Historians claim that Jesus was more likely born in a cave hewn from the limestone there than a stable. A cave is where families would shelter their animals. Travel writer H.V. Morton tells of his visit to the Church of the Nativity. He came to a great wall, and in the wall there was a door so low that he had to stoop to enter it; and through the door and on the other side of the wall was the church. When you enter the church beneath the high altar is the cave. When pilgrims descend into it, they enter a cavern about fourteen yards long and four yards wide, lit by lamps. In the floor there is a star with the inscription, "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." <sup>i</sup>

The Lord of the Universe came to this earth in a place that sheltered animals, a cave perhaps. We do not know exactly or for certain. But there is something profoundly beautiful about a church with a door so low one must stoop to enter it. It is most fitting that to see the birthplace of the infant Jesus, one must get on one's knees.

That is what the magi do. First things first. They kneel at the cradle to worship and adore, because they know that God has a better way in mind.

Not the ways of Herod, threatening death to anyone who would expect the right to live fully and safely.

Herod sees them as a threat to his insecure little throne as tyrants often do.

Instead God comes as a vulnerable child, a real King.

He reigns by love and not by force.

He rules over human hearts not from a throne, but from a cross.

Such are the ways of God.

Jesus bridges heaven and earth to show us the ways of peace, to bring healing, and to call us to resist evil and its ways in this world. This is what we profess in our baptism.

So while Matthew's telling is the adult version of the birth and infancy of Jesus, we need to hear the truth. We seek, like the magi, THE One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

For us Christ was born! For us Christ was raised. So, in this new year, let us be all FOR Him.

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<sup>i</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 1974), 29.