

Stars, Signs and Salvation

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January 5th, 2020

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."^[b]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Revelation 7:9-17

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

"Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb."

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying:

“Amen!

Praise and glory

and wisdom and thanks and honor

and power and strength

be to our God for ever and ever.

Amen!”

13 Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

14 I answered, “Sir, you know.”

And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore,

“they are before the throne of God

and serve him day and night in his temple;

and he who sits on the throne

will shelter them with his presence.

16 Never again will they hunger;

never again will they thirst.

The sun will not beat down on them, ^[a]

nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb at the center of the throne

will be their shepherd;

he will lead them to springs of living water. ^[b]

‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. ^[c]’

We and the church have both, collectively, made it another year. While technically the new decade starts in 2021 people are talking about this year, 2020, as a brand-new page in our history. One of the many big things about 2020 is that it's an election year, a big one. In a few months, and I talk about this as if it hasn't happened already, we are going to be inundated with political ads, posters, lawn signs, stickers, and buttons that tell us that our only hope is voting for a certain political candidate.

So many things are at stake. Our way of life, our economy, our stability, our peace...all of these things hang in the balance when we vote at the end of the year. We are also entering the season of Epiphany. Epiphany literally means “manifestation.” We celebrate the divinity of Jesus as told in the bible passages of the Magi visiting Jesus as well as Jesus' baptism. This Sunday, however, we have two different scriptures; the

traditional Magi visitation story as told in Matthew, but also, the apocalyptic dream-like text from Revelation. Usually a text for All Saints Sunday, we get to see what happens after the 7th seal is opened. I've had the honor of giving the sermon on Epiphany Sunday for a 3rd year in a row now. I've talked about kings, and wise men, and what the divinity of Jesus means. I've also preached on this Revelation text for All Saints Sunday. Today they sit beside each other telling a different story of what the "manifestation" meant for those who follow Jesus.

The Epiphany story as told in Matthew...it's a story of big risk. It's a story of one big risk after another with huge political implications. Shelly Matthews, Professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity School names how this blessed event is played out in risky circumstances in a very risky time. And we know this story. King Herod is a tyrannical king, and like many kings, scared of losing power, particularly to someone who was just born. To set the scene, scripture gives the impression that all of Jerusalem is "with" King Herod. In our time and place, we know quite a bit about tyrannical kings. We know the ins and outs of how petulant rulers with fragile egos operate. We also know that in every time, space, and culture, there are people to dissent in regards to the current authority. Can we really be sure that "all Jerusalem" was with Herod? Probably not. But the culture at the time was probably very pro-Herod. And likely, some were heartened by this news of a potential new king.

The magi were not seen as "wise men," even though many folks would call the magi "wise men" or "wise kings." Nowhere in the scriptures does it say that they were wise, or that they were men, or that there were 3. For Israelites reading Matthew's gospel, Magi were likely seen as pagan religious fanatics who "did astrology" and caved to superstitions. It should also be noted that later in Matthew that important things are not revealed to the "wise and learned." Being wise has no influence in knowing something as important as the Messiah's birth. But speaking of wise, in this scripture, they aren't acting all that smart. They hear of the birth of Christ and asked Herod, a sensitive tyrant, about who this "new" king might be. Anyone who had any idea who Herod was might have had the foresight to know he would not take that well. And he doesn't. We know what Herod commands after hearing the news of a new king.

By being unsubtle and asking about this new king, the Magi put a whole lot of people in danger. Sometimes we naively play into systems that fuel power and create problems for others. This reminds me of the story where well-meaning people called upon a corrupt and unjust system to check on the welfare of a young woman and her nephew.

In October of last year Tatiana Jefferson was playing video games late into the night with her nephew. Their front door was slightly ajar. A well-meaning but naive and concerned neighbor called the police for a wellness check to make sure everything was ok. This ended fatally for Tatiana. A young police officer approached an open window, didn't identify himself, and shot Tatiana as he believed she had a weapon.

One could easily and quickly say not all police officers...and that's true. The argument could also be made that not all of Jerusalem was behind Herod even though the

scriptures say, “and all Jerusalem with him” by being nervous about a king being born. Generalizing doesn’t help anybody or bring anybody back in this case. It doesn’t bring back the children that were killed under Herod’s reign nor does it bring back Tatiana Jefferson. But I think this can be an exercise in thinking through the power we have, and the power that comes with consulting authority in precarious situations. The magi took a risk that stirred up trouble and it ended up being a risk that had fatal consequences.

Our Magi have a redemptive arc. They were told in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they went home by another route. They could have again naively played into Herod’s hands by telling him where Jesus was so that he could “worship” him. Instead, such an encounter is divinely avoided. They seek another way home without alerting authorities and bringing more trouble on the heads of innocent people.

But there’s something else at play here. Matthew is a Jewish author, steeped in Jewish tradition, and yet he chooses to highlight 3 pagan (or some say Zoroastrian) priests who are then turned in his story from astrologers into heroes. The Magi would have been seen as superstitious or even evil by some of the more orthodox Jewish people of the day, and here they are not only paying homage to Jesus, but finding Jesus through astrology, by the sign of a star that directly pointed them to exact place where Jesus was. All this may not come about in a way familiar to Matthew’s author, or our own religious experience, but it was divinely inspired nonetheless.

It’s possible we can all think of moments where we are led by God and we are confused, like the Magi at the beginning of the text, or the signs from God are super obvious, like a star hanging out over exactly where we’re supposed to be. Our signs from God may not come in the forms we’re expecting, in fact, they can come from that which is completely unexpected.

Our other text for today is from Revelation 7:9-17. This is a text that is often used for All Saints Sunday which we celebrated a number of weeks ago. It has long been thought that this was an allegorical clap back at Roman emperors Nero and Domitian. But today that has all been set aside and its context was likely inter-Christian struggle with whether or not to conform to the Roman cult of empire, or rather, do we worship the Emperor or do we claim Jesus as Lord?

In the beginning of the Revelation passage, a multitude of people are standing before God, and while being “tabernacled” in God’s presence they are, as Peter Perry describes, “protected, separated, praising, persecuted and vindicated.” These are people that cannot be counted, as scriptures say, because there are so many of them. They go on to be described as people “From every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues.”

Scholar Justo Gonzales described the “John” that we attribute to writing these texts as a “mestizo,” or someone of a mixed cultural heritage. He states that likely, the author was a Palestinian refugee in the context of Asia Minor due to the Roman-Jewish war. The audience he was writing to would likely be primarily Greek-speaking. Therefore, he is in

a land not his own writing in a language that's not his own. To quote Justo Gonzales again, "the mestizo is at home in two places, and not quite at home in either."

Waving palm branches (and it doesn't take long to figure out which Gospel scene this mimics), God's people make huge, anti-patriotic claims that say that salvation, blessing, glory and power belong not to the emperor, but to God alone. This palm branch-waving not only mimics the triumphal entry, but also the Feast of Tabernacles as found in Leviticus. This took place just before the Exodus. And so in Revelation, the shepherd-turned-Lamb, Jesus, is leading people out of something else. Instead of leading God's people out of Egypt, God is leading people out of the Roman Empire. And unlike the crowd that turned its back on the Messiah, this group promises to be loyal "forever and ever."

Those who belong to the Lamb's multitude are those who have come out of the great tribulation. And this is where things get tricky. For a long time, it was popular to categorize the audience receiving the words from John as folks who were under intense persecution as Christians under some megalomaniacal emperor. There has been no real evidence to show that Christians in particular were being targeted at this time. However, it has since been thought that people faithful to Christ and his teachings were being marginalized socially, economically, and religiously because of their inability to follow the cult of Empire, or Emperor worship.

The groups' sin is washed away with an allusion to Isaiah which says, "though your sins are scarlet, they shall be made as snow." And it's important to notice the white robes, because robes are very important. Not only are they practical clothes, they signify someone's place or status. The prodigal son gets a new robe not only because he probably needs one, but to show that he is restored to his family. God calls God's people to come home from their exile. God promises to wipe away all tears, another reference to Isaiah.

But the NRSV gives us a translation problem here. John's heavenly being tells John that these folks in white are those who have "come out" of the great ordeal. A more accurate translation would be, "coming out" of a great ordeal. Revelation gets a lot of "rapture" theology hoisted onto it and some would say that these folks have been "raptured" but no, they're not. They are still going through something. The church, as it were, suffers.

For both these texts, the connection can be made between governments that can stand in the way of being faithful. The cult of empire is as tempting as it is powerful. Sometimes we suffer in it, as those who came out of the great ordeal, and sometimes others suffer for it because we aren't wise enough to pay attention to power. What does it mean for the church to be a witness to a world where worship and honor and praise are going toward whoever is in power and not to who is ultimately in power? What does it mean for us to set our sights and our hope and allegiance to a fallen system of which we are a part verses God's Kingdom of which we are also a part?

Early Anabaptists detached themselves from the government and some of our Anabaptist siblings still choose not to vote or run for office. But over time, we as Mennonites have sought to be a witness to government through our involvement. And that is a turn we have taken and that is fine. But the question I'm after is what does it mean to participate? What do these stories tell us about our governments and God? How is one to be a Christian and also an American? Is there such a thing as a "healthy" participation in Empire? What does it look like? Before you think I'm advocating for Christian Anarchism, and I may be by the end of this sermon, hear me out.

I'm not just asking as a way to get you to think about what it might look like not to participate. Not participating in some way when so much is at stake feels irresponsible. Some might even argue it is irresponsible. And so we participate in our own way, but, I'm also asking, what are we actively doing to be a witness to empire? I love complaining about my government, particularly if the dominant political culture is not my own. In the past few weeks we've likely done a lot of traveling and visiting friends and family and while some families agree on lots and lots of things, politics is likely not one of those subjects. And while polite dinner conversation is supposed to avoid sex and politics, we tend to be great at avoiding sex but maybe not so much politics.

It's easy to become cynical or jaded. It's easy to become paralyzed with fear or "analysis paralysis" where we're thinking so much we can't actually move into action. It's easy to slip into this mindset when things seem hopeless. What good can we do? What difference can we make? Is any of this redeemable? This is where our Revelation text is helpful. John's vision is one hope. Those who are coming out of the great ordeal will never again hunger, nor will they thirst. The sun will no longer beat down on them. They will be led to springs of living water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Late Thursday night and early Friday morning, the US launched air strikes in Baghdad killing an Iranian general and thus further igniting tensions between the US and the Middle East. Iranian leaders, according to the news, say this calls for "severe revenge." A New York Times opinion piece stated that this death would "launch chaos." The US went on the offensive, leaving us vulnerable to acts of aggression.

As a historic peace church living in an unstable and volatile time, what is our response? If we follow the Magi's lead, knowing that our hope is to eventually be comforted by God, how do we live and move in the here and now? Is our response to rally behind Empire? Or might we choose to go home by another route?

Might I suggest a few things. Menno Simons stated that true evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. We as a peace church offer something different and counter-cultural in times of war. I believe during times like these, our stance on culture make us extremely vulnerable and also extremely appealing. What if instead of talking about being for or against Empire we showed up in ways that make for Christian Formation? And yes, I believe our best hope against national idolatry, war, and destruction is Christian Formation. What if we as a church stood in stark contrast not only to the war machine that Empire ends up being, but other things as well? In an age where we're suspicious

of the stranger, what if we welcomed the stranger? In a time where toxic masculinity tells boys and men what it means to be a “real man,” what if the church offered healthy and robust ways for us to raise boys to become compassionate and self-aware adults with a love for God instead of guns and violence? What if the church offered to shape girls and young women in ways that allowed them to find their value and worth in who they are and what their calling might be? What if the church, instead of squabbling and in-fighting over who’s in and who’s out, offered radical hospitality to everyone? Not just those that show an interest in “being like us,” not just those who will likely join our church, but to everyone? What if, instead of calling the police on our neighbors, we checked up on them instead? What if, instead of talking about change, we did some changing instead?

If people want to know what my vision for Christian Formation is, this is it. That from birth to death, we work and strive for ways that form us in the ways of Christ. That is the way of compassion, mercy, justice, peace, and love. We achieve that by rejecting what Empire has to offer in ways of power and might. We, as a church, offer something different. We, as a church, point to salvation that came in the form of a baby, born out in the middle of nowhere, praised by both Magi and shepherds, and feared by the powers that be.

But I don’t want all our focus to be on “shoulds” or “do betters.” We see our work cut out for us. Our Revelation text is one of comfort. Those who are dealing with what it means to be both a Christian while living in empire will see God. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, they won’t be hungry or thirsty, they will be pulled out of exile. The Revelation text’s context is one where empire imposes itself in such a way that it stands between people and their God. The Revelation text reminds me of the John the Baptist text from earlier this Advent. John the Baptist, a different John than the author of Revelation, is a voice crying out in the wilderness, Comfort my people Israel. Your salvation is coming. In this Revelation text, God is comforting, saying “Your salvation is already here.”

Our salvation is already here. Our salvation has come in the form of Immanuel, God with us. This salvation scares our leaders because our leaders benefit from oppressing the marginalized, making us fear for our lives, and buying into its system. Our foundations as a society are shaken when the savior of the world is born as a baby in a manger. Our society doesn’t know what to do when salvation makes friends with sex workers, tax collectors, fishers, and formerly demon-possessed women. Our salvation suffered a very public, violent, and humiliating death, only to make an appearance 3 days later. That is a miracle, and that is revolutionary.

And speaking of, that is at the heart of revolutionary Christianity. Acknowledging the power you have so as not to create problems for people unprotected in our society while using the power that we do have to send a message. That message is good news for the poor, and hungry, and homeless. That’s good news for refugees, immigrants, those who’ve been thrown out by the church, those who suffer under empire. We all suffer under empire, but our power can shield us from the very worst it has to offer. Being

revolutionary means sharing that power in such a way that allows vulnerable people to get the boots of those in power off their necks. Being revolutionary means sharing power and pledging allegiance to our God and to the Lamb that now sits on the throne, waiting to pull us out of empirical exile. Being revolutionary means not waiting for the world to turn, but to see where it's already turning, and to join in where God is already working.

So back to our star. The star that led the Magi to Jesus is now leading us. Where is this star leading you? What does it mean for God to call you home from exile? The way is dangerous, both for us and for others. But our salvation has been born and we cannot help but follow.