

1st Sunday after Christmas
1.1.23

Matthew 2:1-23

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.

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." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, 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." When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, 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. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean." (598)

Some Sundays there's no telling what time it is.

Like today. In one sense it's New Year's Day, a new beginning of sorts, if only formally, notionally. It has us overtired for having stayed up for the countdown, or somewhat apologetic

that we went to bed early. It has us resolved to do better with this new year than we did last year, which resolutions might keep until next month.

In another sense, it's the end of the holiday season, and we're relieved it's over or sad it's over, worn out or worn thin or still aglow with it all. It was either merry, or it wasn't, either easy or taxing—or all of the above.

In still another sense, it's the first Sunday of the month, Communion Sunday, which has us with Jesus on the night of his arrest when he gathered with friends, that last night of his life. Yet it's also still Christmastide, so we're still at his birth, with him even this morning in what Matthew, our gospel writer this year, remembers as a house in Bethlehem.

the Magi have arrived from the East.

They went first to Jerusalem, of course, having learned from the new star in the night sky that a new king had been born to the Jews—the night sky, which they knew well, they studied carefully, thoroughly. And where would a new king to the Jews have been born but Jerusalem, mighty, gleaming Jerusalem?

They arrived there, and they asked around, and word eventually reached Herod, who knew himself to be the king of the Jews, and who therefore wasn't happy to hear of competition. All Jerusalem, the story says, was frightened with Herod, meaning this competition would redound to the whole power structure—though of which they didn't know the half of it. This new king wouldn't just upset the power structure in place now (in Jerusalem, in Judea) among this people now (the Jews, the Israelites). It would upset every power structure everywhere.

If done right, anyway.

Love will do that. Love: it sneaks in through cracks, sneaks over walls. It transgresses boundaries, crosses red lines in the sand, breaks down formalities, erodes decorum.

Exemplified even in this story, where's this wonderful admixture of things. The Magi, as I said, knew the night sky. Astrologers, early cosmologists, they studied the creation as if it contained truth, which would have been unacceptable to Jews, these whose search for truth was in sacred text, ancient scripture.

Just so, the Magi's knowledge had led them this far. But now came knowledge known from scripture, the prophet who foretold that it wasn't in Jerusalem a king would be born to the Jews, but in Bethlehem, little Bethlehem, with little to boast of itself.

Who'd have thought?

In this way, Matthew begins his gospel in exactly the spirit it would continue and it would at last conclude, that this new thing being born into the world would be for all the world, would indeed be such a mystery and wonder that no one body of knowledge would be able absolutely to plumb it, no one people's wisdom would be enough to bring it fully to light and to human knowing, and still less to human understanding. This project of an incarnate God and his saving love would take the whole world.

To Bethlehem, then. And then to return to Jerusalem that the Magi might tell Herod where exactly that he might also go. To pay him homage, he said. To pay homage to this new king, this infant king, a mere bud to nip. Easiest thing in the world.

I read somewhere this week in a commentary about this passage that Jesus first arrives in his own gospel as one wholly acted upon. In this story of his earliest years, he is the object of others' action, mostly Joseph's action. Joseph takes him to Egypt, in flight from the murderous Herod. Joseph takes him out of Egypt now that it was safe—but not so safe that return to Bethlehem would be wise. So, he takes him at last to Nazareth.

And on the one hand, it's no surprise that a baby wouldn't be an active agent in any such story.

On the other hand, to notice this as regards Jesus is to wonder about the power of God in the world—as much mighty as it is vulnerable, as much transformative as it is needful.

Which brings us to what time it is today. This story. Again, with this story, which comes to us every three years, as it's one that only Matthew tells. The Christmas service of lessons and carols, with its mixing of snippets from all four gospels, always features the Magi, though they to are remembered only in Matthew. But on Christmas Eve the story of them lets off where they let off, returning to their home by another road. Only once every three years do we hear the second half of it, this shadow of it, cast long and waitful. Only every three years does it show up in the lectionary—and always for the Sunday after Christmas, when the last thing in the world any of us might want to hear about is a massacre of innocents, a massacre of children. We are yet amidst the holidays, after all. Really, we're mixed up in all sorts of time-keeping. At our homes it might be that the tree is still up, its lights still aglow. And we've hardly slept, and we're busy with resolutions for self-improvement. And now this? Really? Do we need to go there with this?

A number of years ago, Esau McCaulley wrote in a column for the *New York Times*. I remember it as a relief of sorts. It had me feeling a little less guilty for foisting this upon the likes of

you on the likes of this day. Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and an Anglican priest, Dr. McCauley defends this story as a crucial part of Christmas celebrations.

First, of course, he acknowledges that this is this a “bloody story.” But it’s crucial because it’s one “out of which hope fights its way to the surface.” And Christmas as much about hope as it is about happiness, as much about the flickering insistence of hope as it is to be the hap-hap-happiest time of the year.

He admits, “Scholars debate the historicity of the event—[this so-called Slaughter of the Innocents]—because it was not recorded by the contemporary Jewish historian Josephus, who provides an otherwise detailed description of Herod’s reign. Nonetheless, Josephus does tell us that Herod had three of his sons killed because he saw them as threats to his power. Commanding the slaughter of children would not be beyond the pale for Herod...”

McCaulley continues, “The Bible story, then, depicts Jesus as a refugee fleeing a nation marked by political violence and being displaced within his own country even after some of the violence settles down. And though he avoids murder by Herod, he does not escape death by the state altogether – [no, of course, as we well know] three decades later, Pontius Pilate, an official of the Roman Empire, pronounces Jesus’ death sentence. Like Herod, Pilate does so to maintain power and remove a threat.”

Just so, “The church calendar calls Christians and others to remember that we live in a world,” according to McCaulley, “in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of the innocent on the altar of power. We are forced to recall that this is a world with families on the run, where the weeping of mothers is often not enough to win mercy for their children. More than anything, the story of the innocents calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate.”

I offer this to you not only because I think Dr. McCaulley is right, and because I take him as authoritative in matters I find important. I offer this also because I’m where you are this morning, or at least where I imagine you are. I’m tired and happy. I’m nostalgic and a little sad. I miss the holiday that was only last week and that passed so quickly, and I’m relieved it’s over so I can get back to regular life. And it’s when I’m exhausted that I look to others to speak.

Christmas is a gift to us; and a challenge, a call to conscience. It is a lullaby for us amidst a clamoring, anxious world; and pealing bell as if to focus our attention, to put it to worthy matters. It is joy and dread, fear and saving grace—and also just the beginning.

Which, too, we've had a lot of lately—beginnings. The beginning of the church year. The beginning of Jesus' life. The beginning of a new calendar year. But today marks the last of these many beginnings. From here, we just go.

Thanks be to God.