

McCabe United Methodist Church
Advent and Christmas 2015: "Cross My Heart" Series

"King and God and Sacrifice"

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-23 (1/2 & 1/3/16)

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Every year on January 6th, the Church celebrates a holiday called *Epiphany*. Some churches celebrate Epiphany on January 6th no matter what day of the week it falls on, while other churches celebrate it over whatever weekend falls closest to January 6th. And, here at McCabe, in 2016, that's this weekend!

The word "Epiphany" comes from the Greek word "epiphaneia," which means "manifestation" or "appearance."

For those of us who call ourselves Christian, the celebration of Epiphany is the *appearance* of Jesus – God's Son – to the wise men, the magi, the "kings" from the east.

We celebrate Epiphany twelve days after Christmas, but in real time, 2,000 years ago, Jesus may very well have been a toddler by the time the magi passed through. All Matthew tells us about the timing of the wise men's visit is that it happened during the time Herod was king of Judea.

Now, the wise men were astrologers from somewhere in the Middle East, not too terribly far from Israel – perhaps from the ancient land of Babylon. Being astrologers, these wise men were trained to read signs in the stars.

The wise men would not have been Jewish like Jesus' family was, but, at the time, Jewish and non-Jewish traditions claimed that particularly large, bright stars announced the birth of royalty.

So, when the wise men saw a particularly large, particularly bright star appear in the heavens, they followed it westward to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. Once they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked around to find out what king had been born to cause such a star to rise.

It's important to note the land of Israel was, at the time, under the occupation of the Roman government and military.

The people of Israel, the Jewish people, had a long history of having their own kings, while occasionally being ruled by an outside, occupying nation or empire. So they were also waiting for God to send them a Messiah: someone who would save the Jewish people from the force of outside nations and who would establish the Jewish people as the “owners” of the land of Israel.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman government had put a Jewish man named Herod in charge of all the Jewish people in the area of Israel surrounding Jerusalem.

King Herod was a sort of “puppet king,” at the mercy of the Roman government, and he is definitely the villain of this story. Herod was power-hungry and very fearful of losing the power he had...even though *he* was only as powerful as the Roman government allowed him be.

When King Herod heard that these wise men from the east had come to Jerusalem looking to worship a newborn Jewish king, well...he wasn't too happy. *He* was the Jewish king. He wanted to continue *being* the Jewish king. So, he devised a plan to destroy this royal newborn.

Herod gathered some Jewish Bible scholars and found out from them that the Messiah – the ultimate Jewish king – was to be born in Bethlehem, just a few miles outside of Jerusalem.

Since Herod knew the wise men were hoping to go meet this newborn king, Herod called the wise men to pay him a visit before they discovered for themselves where to go. When the wise men arrived at Herod's, he told them to “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, let me know. I want to go and worship him too.”

The wise men went to Bethlehem, found Jesus, and joyfully honored him. As gifts, they gave him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then, in a dream, the wise men were warned not to go back to Herod in Jerusalem...so, after worshiping Jesus and leaving him their gifts, they

went back to their own country without first talking to Herod. Of course, there was a very specific reason Herod had wanted the wise men to return to Jerusalem to tell him where the baby Messiah was in Bethlehem:

Herod had intended to use the wise men as pawns in his own “search and destroy” mission. He was out to kill the young Messiah and he'd hoped the wise men would make it easy for him to do just that.

When the wise men did not return to Jerusalem to report to Herod precisely where the baby Messiah was, Herod was furious and took matters into his own hands: he ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill all of the baby boys under 2-years-old. “If I can’t find the one I want, I’ll just get rid of *all* of them,” Herod thought.

As readers who are concerned with the life of the baby Jesus, we are relieved to know that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had, by this time, become refugees – fleeing their home country and heading to safety in Egypt.

Like the wise men who were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, *Joseph* had been told in a dream to flee with Mary and Jesus to Egypt.

Matthew's story of King Herod slaughtering the innocent babies and toddlers of Bethlehem is one of the ugliest stories in Scripture. We don't want to think about this part of the Christmas story...we don't want to remember this darker side of Christmas and Epiphany.

Let's just think about the magi giving their worship and their gifts to the baby Jesus – let's forget about what happens next in the story...let's forget about King Herod with his manipulation and his violence. We like our nativity scenes to be sweet and peaceful.

Yet, as much as we may not want to think about this part of the story, *Matthew* needs us to think about it. He told it for a reason. When he tells us the story of King Herod slaughtering the innocent children of Bethlehem, Matthew is offering his readers a bit of foreshadowing.

Because, though Jesus was kept safe *this* time around, a time would come when he would no longer be safe.

We'll be singing it as our closing song, but for a bit, we're going to look together at the text of the hymn "We Three Kings".

Most of us likely know the first verse and refrain of this Epiphany hymn:

"We three kings of orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain moor and mountain, following yonder star. Star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light." Many of us likely know that part.

It's the remaining verses I want to focus on because, in the remaining verses, we get to words about the gifts and what they symbolize.

Verse two is "Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again, King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign."

Then verse three: "Frankincense to offer have I; incense owns a Deity nigh; prayer and praising, voices raising, worshiping God on high."

These two gifts are pretty powerful: the gold reminds us of a King's golden crown while the frankincense recalls the tradition of burning incense as a holy offering – gifts meant to symbolize Jesus as both *King* and *God*.

But then we get to verse four and the mood changes dramatically. The music of the entire song is quite haunting, but I get goosebumps every time I sing verse four:

"Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing sighing, bleeding dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb."

The story is about three grown men bringing worship and gifts to a toddler – and here we are in verse four singing about myrrh, an oil used to anoint dead bodies.

We're singing about "a life of gathering gloom;" about "sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying." And that piece about the "stone-cold tomb" ... we've just had Christmas and suddenly we find ourselves at the cross of Good Friday.

I once invited an elementary-school-aged child to help me serve Communion – he was excited to help and I love it when all sorts of people assist during Holy Communion.

Before worship, he and I went over what he was to do and what he was to say when folks came forward to receive Communion. I was going to give the bread; he was going to offer the cup. And I'm quite sure that when we went over this, I instructed him to say, "the blood of *Christ*, shed for you."

When we got to Communion during the actual worship service, as folks received the bread, *I* said, "the body of Christ, given for you," and I noticed that, as folks received the juice, *he* was saying, "God's blood shed for you." I immediately had an instinct to pause and correct him so he was saying "*Christ's* blood shed for you" and not "God's blood."

However, on the one hand, he was speaking with such confidence that I didn't want to trip him up, and, on the other hand, he may have been saying the most correct thing he could have said.

In that moment of hearing this young boy offering the gift of Holy Communion and saying "God's blood shed for you," I was reminded that that is exactly what Communion is all about.

On Christmas we celebrate the gift of the Incarnation – the gift of God being born into this world a human child, Jesus Christ. Through the Incarnation, God shows us how important it is to be human: through Jesus, God was born, God lived among us, and God taught us what being human is all about – mercy, love of enemies, welcoming strangers, forgiveness...

But we humans make mistakes. We humans didn't like what God had to say to us about mercy, love of enemies, welcoming strangers, and forgiveness...so, in Jesus, we put God on trial, sentenced God to death, and hung God to bleed and die on a cross.

"*God's blood shed for you...for the whole world.*" It's what Holy Communion is about; it's what Epiphany is about – and it's what the hymn "We Three Kings" is about.

The gift of gold was for Jesus the King; the gift of frankincense was for Jesus the Son of God; and the gift of myrrh was for Jesus the holy sacrifice. *That* is what Matthew is foreshadowing with his story of King Herod slaughtering the innocent children of Bethlehem.

In this awful story, Matthew gives us a clue about Jesus' own violent death at the hands of other fearful, power-hungry leaders.

Sacrifice is a central theme of Jesus' story: we experience that theme every time we celebrate Holy Communion and we will sing about sacrifice when we close this worship service with "We Three Kings."

But, while sacrifice is a *central* theme of Jesus' story, it's not the *only* theme... because, of course, Jesus' story did not end on the cross. Jesus' story did not end in that stone-cold tomb. And the final verse of "We Three Kings" reminds us of this.

See, the final verse finds us at *Easter* – it's the victorious verse of Resurrection: "Glorious now behold him *arise*; King and God and sacrifice: Alleluia, alleluia, sounds through the earth and skies."

We started at Christmas...we moved on to the story of the magi on Epiphany...then, with the story of King Herod slaughtering the innocent babies and toddlers of Bethlehem, Matthew foreshadowed the cross of Good Friday – when God's own innocent child was himself slaughtered.

There is something about Epiphany, and about Matthew's telling of the story, that nearly gives us a complete snapshot of Jesus' birth, his life, his death, and his resurrection.

As we celebrate Holy Communion, reflect on what it all means for you, what it all means for our world.

Long ago, three kings journeyed together to see God revealed in a small child. In response, *they* offered worship and generosity.

Another king – a fearful king – sought to destroy that same small child...*he* offered manipulation and violence in response

Worship and generosity...or manipulation and violence.

The good news for all of us here today is that the holy child of Bethlehem, born 2,000 years ago, is a gift of mercy and love to every single you, to me...to the whole world. How we respond to this amazing gift is up to us.