

Date: January 10, 2021 (Epiphany)

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: THE LOVE OF CHRIST IN EVERY HEART

There was a family, a year before Covid-19, that was driving to Thomasville, North Carolina just before Christmas. They made this long trip because their cousins and aunts and uncles lived there. Their family was getting together for a Christmas celebration.

As they passed the Episcopal Church, where a manger scene was in the yard, the 5-year-old asked about the meaning of the manger scene. It was explained, “That’s Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, there in the manger.”

A few blocks further on, they passed the Methodist church, where a scene was depicting the journey of the Wise Men. The 5 year old asked, “Who are they?”

The mother replied, “Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus.” The 5 year old said, “Well, they won’t find Jesus there. He’s back there at the Episcopal church.”

Well, actually, he was right. They didn’t find the baby Jesus at the Methodist church. They didn’t find the baby Jesus in a manger, in a stable surrounded by donkeys and sheep either. Most of you have been around church long enough, so you know that some of our traditional portrayals of this holy event, are not quite accurate.

For instance, nowhere in Scripture does it say there were three magi. That’s an assumption people have made, because the magi presented three gifts to the Christ child. Plus, the magi weren’t present at the stable, where Christ was born, no matter how many times, they may show up in Christmas dramas today. Matthew tells us clearly, that “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea . . . Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” Later we read, “On coming to the **house**, not a **stable**, but a **house**, they saw the **child**, not a **baby**, but a **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.”

So, by Epiphany, the day we celebrate the coming of the wise men, to worship the newborn king, Mary and Joseph and their child had obviously had time to move from the humble stable, to a house. In our joy to celebrate Christ’s birth, we have jumbled together two separate stories.

We actually know very little about the magi. I wonder what kind of men they were? In the folklore of our faith, they are given names, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In some portrayals of the magi, they have distinctive racial features, Melchior, European; Balthasar, African; and Caspar, Asian. They represent people from all over the world coming to seek Jesus.

They have been characterized as kings, though nowhere in the story are they called that. Obviously they were not lowly peasants. Herod and all of Jerusalem would not have been distressed if three peasants had come seeking the newborn king. Matthew writes, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born

king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and notice, **all Jerusalem with him.**” I doubt that three nobodies, would have had such an impact. So, maybe they were kings.

Scholars have surmised that these magi, traveled as many as twelve hundred miles across the ancient highways from Persia to Judea, in order to see the child, bring him gifts, and pay him homage. This means they had been traveling for at least five months, guided by this wondrous star.

Now, we don’t even know for certain the year that Christ was born. We date our calendars according to his coming, and yet, we’re uncertain which year that really was. Luke connects his birth with a decree from Caesar Augustus, requiring all residents of the Roman Empire, to enroll for a tax census. He also records, that this census took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

We know from certain archaeological discoveries, that Quirinius ruled Syria from 9 B.C. to 6 B.C. Luke also says that Jesus began his public ministry “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius” and that Jesus then was “about thirty years of age.” These figures, when applied to the known dates, for the reign of the Roman Emperor Tiberius, indicate that Jesus was born either in 6 B.C. or 7 B.C.

In 1603, the astronomer Johannes Kepler discovered that in 7 B.C., there was an unusual occurrence among the planets. He found that, in that year, Jupiter and Saturn, which are generally in remote parts of the sky, came so near together three times, that to the unassisted eye, the rays of one were absorbed by the other, and their combination gave an extraordinarily brilliant light, which continued for some months.

So, there are many questions about the details of our Christmas celebrations. But, it’s the spirit of the season that matters, not that all the i’s are dotted and all the t’s are crossed.

Now, there are, some traditions, that are on much firmer ground. For example, the character of King Herod. Historian Paul Maier says, “You may be surprised to hear this, but if you’re ever asked which is the one figure, from the ancient world, on whom we have more primary evidence, from original sources, than anyone else in the world, the answer is not Jesus or Saint Paul or Caesar Augustus or Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great! It’s Herod the Great! Because the historian Josephus gives us two whole book scrolls, on the life of Herod the Great. That’s more primary material, than anyone else.”

Herod had quite an impact on the world of his time. He was notorious for his building programs. He built ten tremendous fortifications, including the temple mount in Jerusalem. At the same time, as you know, he was one nasty individual.

Over the years, he killed many people, including his brother-in-law, his mother-in-law and one of his several wives.

According to Dr. Ray Pritchard, “It was the murder of his wife that drove him mad. He killed her, because he thought she was a threat to his power. But he never got over her. Even though he was only 44 when he killed her, and even though he lived to be 70, her murder was the beginning of the end. You see, above everything else, Herod the Great was a killer. That was his nature. He killed out of spite and he killed to stay in

power. Human life meant nothing to him. The great historian Josephus called him 'barbaric,' another writer dubbed him 'the malevolent maniac,' yet another named him 'the great pervert.'

"Perhaps his basic character can best be seen by one incident in the year 7 B.C. Herod is an old man now. He has been in power 41 years. He knows he doesn't have much longer to live. Word comes that his sons are plotting to overthrow him. They're the sons by his late wife Mariamne. He orders them put to death . . . by strangling."

So, it should send a chill up our spine when we read, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.'"

Herod was one of the world's true villains. But, ironically, the Roman Senate had bestowed a title on Herod, when he was in exile. The title was "King of the Jews."

Who did the magi say they were seeking? "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? The plot begins to thicken. There's no way the Jews could have two kings.

Our story continues, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. Herod called together all the people's chief priests, teachers of the law, and asked them, where the Messiah was to be born.

They replied, "In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: '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.'

"Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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."

Actually, worship was the furthest thing from Herod's mind. So, by the time we leave the joy and warmth and love of Christmas and move to Epiphany, we enter a world of realism, where love is endangered by hate, joy is threatened by fear, and kindness is overshadowed by evil. In fact, that's not too different from the world in which we live now. We live in a world in which right and wrong, good and evil, love and hatred, still do mortal conflict. It's the reason it's important, where we choose to stand. With the haters? With the exploiters? With those who flaunt their bigotry? Or with Christ who was willing to give up his life, that all who choose him, may have life?

Fortunately, the story continues. "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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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."

Some kindergarteners in Great Britain were asked about the story of the Magi, and they had some interesting insights on it: one young boy said, that the three wise men brought Jesus some gold stuff, "but Legos would have been better!"

Maybe so. As a young child, Jesus probably would have preferred something to play with, rather than gold, frankincense and myrrh. Mary would probably have preferred some disposable diapers.

Anyway, back to the story, “And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the magi returned to their country by another route.” And so, the Christ child was protected. But Herod, still had his devious plans to kill the child, who was born to occupy his throne, King of the Jews.

Now, the story doesn't end there. Mary, Joseph and their child escaped Herod, but their life would never be an easy one. It's not accidental, that above Jesus head as he hung on the cross was a sign that said, “King of the Jews.” Just as Jesus' spirit lives on, so does the spirit of King Herod. There are still those, whose love of power, and position, cause them to do much evil in this world. Children still die in places where their families are exploited, children are deprived, and children are separated from their families.

That's why Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven . . .” for God's will is, that one day “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them” (Isaiah 11:6).

This is why the story must forever be told, that the true King of the Jews, has become the King, and one day will rule over all, where the love of Christ will live in every heart. May the Love of Christ live in your heart as you Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.