

“Light”
Matthew 2:13-23
January 5, 2020 Epiphany Sunday/Communion

Before we read this story from Matthew, I want to give you the context. Jesus has been born in Bethlehem, which we celebrated at Christmas. The Wisemen, who are sometime called Magi or kings, have come from the East (meaning Persian or modern day Iran). These were likely scholars who studied the stars, and they saw a star in the sky and interpreted it as the birth of a great king. So they followed it, and since they were expecting a great king, they went to the seat of power in Jerusalem, to King Herod to congratulate him. But since King Herod knew it was not his son they were talking about, it disturbed him greatly to hear a king had been born.

Now this King Herod, also known as Herod the Great for his architectural achievements, was one that killed his wife and one of his sons because he was suspicious about them. He could be ruthless. So he sent the Wisemen on to Bethlehem, where his advisers said the messiah would be born, with the hope that the Wisemen would tip him off to where that baby was. But after the Wisemen saw the baby Jesus, worshipped him, and gave him gifts, they were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, so they headed home a different way. I want to warn you, this is a rough passage. So now listen as we read these words from Matthew 2:13-23.

READ Matthew 2:13-23

It is rare that I have heard this passage preached in a church. As Steve eloquently said in a sermon on Dec 22, we in the church tend to clean up the story of Jesus’ birth, to sanitize it. We dress up in pretty angel wings and halos, shepherd’s crooks, and Mary/Joseph and sometimes a donkey in homemade costumes. It is sweet, innocent, and sometimes downright hilarious.

But the actual story of Jesus’ birth is more earthy than that. Mary traveling with Joseph when she was 9 months pregnant could not have been comfortable. She gave birth in a borrowed room with farm animals. The manger may have been filled with hay and soft cloths, and surrounded by love, but also surrounded with the smells of chickens and donkeys. The shepherds who visited them would have smelled of their hard work outside for days and nights on end with the sheep. And the Magi who came, may have been a confusing sight for the new parents, tired and sleep deprived as they were from caring for a baby and changing diapers.

After the Wisemen left, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to safety, and he did, taking Mary and Jesus as refugees down into Egypt. There they lived as foreigners, not knowing the language or the customs. And some of those children who died in Bethlehem, they may have been some of Joseph’s own nieces, nephews, and cousins. In a small village like Bethlehem, that grief would have lingered. They may have even asked the question, “Why was one child spared and the others weren’t?” It is an uncomfortable story in many respects.

And even when Joseph was told in a dream that it was safe to return, that King Herod had died, he settled in Nazareth in the north rather than in Bethlehem where Herod’s son ruled. It was as if he was still looking over his shoulder for danger, trusting in God, obeying God, but still on the alert for danger.

Such a rough story, and frankly one that makes me squirm. But it is also more like the world we live in than our sweet pictures of Christmas. It reminds me of the reality that in our world children are often the first to suffer from war and oppression. That in our world there are children and parents who are immigrants and refugees running from danger, and there are senseless killings. Hearing this Biblical story helps us to face and shed light on our current day realities.

But where is the good news, the gospel, in a story like this?

For Matthew's church, part of the good news is that God chose to come to the world we do live in, a world where sometimes angel wings feel broken, halos are jostled, people get hurt, and stars seem dim. Out of love God came to be with us in the messy realness of our lives. And not with power or force, but in vulnerability and human frailty. To use the theological term, the Incarnation—which means God became flesh and blood. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” says John 1:14. God through Jesus knows what it is to be human. Jesus experienced life as we do, both in its pain and sorrow, but also in its breathtaking beauty, kindness, and joy. All so that we might know that God is with us.

Another part of this good news for Matthew's church, was that Jesus understood their specific experiences. The Jewish Christians of Matthew's church had been displaced and dispersed by war with Rome. Jesus knew what it was to be displaced as a refugee from those who wielded Roman power. The Jewish ancestors of Matthew's church had gone down to Egypt as immigrants, and were threatened by a powerful Pharaoh who killed their children. Jesus knew what it was to go down to Egypt and be fearful of a ruthless tyrant. And just like their ancestor and hero Moses, Jesus had spent time in Egypt and would bring them out to freedom.

Matthew's church saw this story as a sign that God was actively working for good, even when the world throws the worst we can imagine at us. Finding a way to work out salvation (and save Joseph, Mary and Jesus) even when the politics, the circumstances conspire against it. To use the words of Desmond Tutu, as he rallied his people to face the tragedy that was apartheid, “Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.”

The other good news of this rough passage, is that it was not just for Matthew's church, but for us, and the whole world. The Magi, the Wisemen following the star were a symbol of the gentile world being brought to the life and light of Christ. Jesus Christ is the life of the world and the light of the world. I have been thinking alot about that light. On my robe is wax that dripped down from the candles we lifted up during the Christmas Eve service, as we circled around the sanctuary and lifted up our candles together in that darkness.

There is a Quaker saying, “I will hold you in the light”. It means lifting someone up to God's presence and goodness, so they can have hope, or peace. Quaker writer Philip Gulley says it is not just a passive action, but it reminds him of the story about two prisoners of war in a dark cell, with only a small 6 inch window about 8 feet off the ground. They would “take turns lifting one another up to the window, so each could feel the light upon his face and see the sun and the outdoors” in order to make it through. So it is more than just remembering them in prayer or envisioning them wrapped in the light of God's love, it is also a willingness to act for someone's betterment. “To stand with them (or carry them) when they are unable to stand for themselves.”

Philip Gulley also talks about holding ourselves and others to the light, when we are tempted to succumb to the rough realities of the world. So his threefold interpretation of this phrase, is an invitation that “We live in the Light of God. We lift and hold others in the Light. And We hold ourselves and others to the Light.”

So as a church, as a community of faith, on this Epiphany Sunday when we pick our “Star Words”. On this First Sunday of the New Year, as we look back at all that 2019 was in its roughness and beauty, and dream of all that 2020 will be. Let us live in the light, hold one another in the light, and hold each other to the light. Let us follow the light of Christ, and face the world head on, as it is, together. Together, let us be a community of hope and light.

Sing the refrain with me from the hymn we sang before the scripture (We Three Kings):

*“O Star of wonder, star of night,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light!”*

May it be so. Amen.