

Hespeler, 6 January 2019 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

I understand why King Herod is frightened. I mean, that makes perfect sense to me. Here a bunch of foreigners show up in one of his grand palaces. They've traveled from a distant country far in the east and they certainly come across as rather wise individuals. They are looking, they say, for one who is born the king of the Jews. Yes, Herod is not going to like that.

King of the Jews was one of his titles and he was certainly not interested in hearing about another claimant to that throne. In fact, Herod was so self-important that he could hardly even tolerate the idea of his own sons succeeding him on the throne and had a number of them put to death. These strangers arriving with news that a new king has been born, one who is obviously not even related to Herod's family, is bound to upset him and, given his somewhat fragile ego, to frighten him.

But I have always wondered about the little detail that Matthew adds to Herod's reaction. He says that *all Jerusalem* was frightened with him. Why would that particular piece of news frighten an entire city? We certainly know that they had no great love for Herod.

I always understood Jerusalem's fear in the way we often think that politics works today. When a powerful politician, like, say, the president of the United States, gets some bad news, everybody in Washington DC tends to get on edge. But this is not (perhaps especially in the present political context) because everyone in Washington loves the president. This is because they know that a frightened and upset president is an unstable president who can sometimes react in pretty dangerous ways and do things that can throw things into great chaos. (And I'm not particularly making any comments on the present political context here. This has been true of many presidents.)

So often when powerful people get frightened, the people around them do get frightened too but not necessarily for the same reasons. So I always thought but that was what was going on in this story of the visit of the wise men. The people were nervous about Herod's reaction.

But today, we read this all-too-familiar story in a bit of a different way than I have for a while. We read it as part of a set of lectionary readings. These are readings that have been designed by some committee somewhere to speak and communicate with each other to help us to look at the stories from a bit of a different angle.

These lessons have reminded me that today is Epiphany and that Epiphany is not just, as we often assume, the day when we celebrate the arrival of the wise men. It is an important festival and season in the life of the church in its own right and it is a



season when we particularly celebrate the revelation of God's hope and salvation and gospel to the whole world.

The readings this morning, you may have noticed, tend to focus especially on outsiders, strangers and gentiles being exposed to the good news about the Hebrew God in various forms. This has made me think that there might be a different reason why all Jerusalem – and the particular representatives of Jerusalem who are named, the chief priests and scribes of the people – were particularly frightened and upset by the arrival of some foreigners asking a rather impertinent question...

The scribes and priests had a number of reasons to be upset as they waited in the king's antechamber. First of all, they had been summoned here on no notice from warm and comfortable beds. Secondly, the king, as usual, was making them wait, his favourite tactic for reminding people that he was the boss. But the third reason was, by far, the most disturbing. It had to do with the reason why they had been summoned. The rumor was that several foreigners, devotees of some strange Persian religion, had come to town. Word was that they thought *they* knew something important about the *Jewish* faith – that is, the faith that was presided over by these very scribes and priests. Can you imagine that? These outsiders thought that they knew more about the faith of these people than these leaders themselves did!

They all understood that that phrase that the magi had used, “**the king of the Jews,**” was a code that their people used when they wanted to talk about the hope of a messiah. It was the most important hope and expectation that any Jew could hold. And these leaders were not about to be instructed on the coming of the messiah by a bunch of foreigners. Why, if there was going to be a messiah, they would make sure that it was a messiah announced by a good old-fashioned Jew, not some stranger.

But that was not the worst part. The worst part was that the question asked by these so-called wise men had forced them to go looking in their own scriptures in order to have something to say to the king when he asked them what this was all about. And, much to their consternation, they had found something. It was a passage in the prophets and it seemed to point to the possibility that the messiah could indeed be born and that, if he was, it would probably be in Bethlehem.

Can you imagine that? Not only had these foreigners forced them to go and read and study their own scriptures, they had prompted them to discover something they had never understood before *and* it turned out that the foreigners might just be right. This was intolerable! They were not about to be taught how to do their job by a bunch of outsiders! And so they decided that, when they were summoned into the presence of the king, they would present a united front. They would not admit that these magi knew anything about kings or messiahs. They would present themselves as the only experts and they would assure the king that everything was under control – their control. There was no

way that they would ever learn anything important about the Jewish messiah from a bunch of foreign magi.

The kings and politicians of this world are frightened by anything that threatens their hold on power. But religious leaders, and by extension the communities that they lead, are frightened by something else. They are frightened that outsiders might know more about the truths that they proclaim than they do. That is the danger that the wise men represent.

And I sometimes think that we in the church today are foolish to think that we are immune to the error that those learned scribes and priests fell into. We think that we've got our messiah – our Jesus Christ – all figured out. I understand why we think that. After all, Christians have been thinking and talking about Jesus for centuries. If some Christian preacher or teacher hasn't said something important about Jesus in all that time, you would think whatever it is, it is really not worth hearing.

But actually, knowledge of the messiah doesn't work like that. Jesus Christ, we believe is still alive and still in the process of revealing himself to his followers. What's more, if the best resource that we have for learning about Jesus is the Bible, we might think that since we have had it for so long, we have understood everything that it has to teach us. But even the Bible doesn't work like that. It seems that Jesus is constantly giving us new understandings, new *epiphanies*, and we really miss out when we don't accept them.

For example, back a few years ago, like around the time when I was born, good Presbyterians had decided that they understood exactly what kind of ministers Jesus wanted leading his churches. In particular, they were sure that Jesus wanted those ministers to be men. The scriptures, after all, were clear on that point. Jesus was male and so were all twelve disciples. That had to be the model intended for the church too.

But then something happened and it didn't really happen inside the church, not at first anyway. It was an idea that started within society in general – a movement that started without reference to what the church thought – the idea that women are essentially equal to men. And eventually these wise... people came to the church and said, "Where are the women who are called to be ministers in your churches?" And when they heard this the leaders of the churches were frightened and all the churches with them.

And some remained there frozen in their fear of change, but others allowed this idea from the outside to send them back to their scriptures. They explored the Bible and discovered that their previous idea hadn't been quite the obvious slam dunk that they had thought it was. They found passages that spoke of female disciples and even apostles – some of which had been neglected and a couple of which were even intentionally mistranslated for centuries.

And so a great conversation took place in the church and it was not an easy conversation because change is never easy in venerable institutions. But, in the end, the church did agree: Christ didn't want us to exclude women from the

ministry. We had been mistaken in our understanding of Christ. And so, ever since, our churches have been greatly enriched by the ministry of many talented and gifted women. But I honestly think that that great blessing would never have happened if there had not been for some wise... people outside of the church pushing us to think in new directions.

Today, as I said earlier, the church celebrates the festival of Epiphany. Sometimes people explain that a bit simplistically by saying that it is when we remember the arrival of the wise men to adore the young baby Jesus. It is that, but traditionally also so much more – it is not about one day when the wise men arrived but that longer period of time – the time that we celebrate as the revelation of the messiah and the message of the gospel to the gentiles.

But what I'm realizing is that even that is not just a one-time event – not even if you expand it to include that whole period of time when the gospel was first preached to the gentiles. It is something that continues to happen. God is continually interested in revealing Godself to new people. Jesus Christ, the living Word of God is not a closed book but a constantly renewing epiphany. The gospel will continue to touch the lives of new people in new ways.

And that is a sometimes frightening proposition to those of us who have been in the church for a while. Because when the gospel begins to touch new people in new ways, they are likely not going to be just like us. They will have different ways of thinking and approaching even fundamental ideas. They won't want to just do things in the ways that they have always been done and so sooner or later they will push us back into our scriptures to discover new things and new ways of looking at things. They might even make us discover that we didn't understand Jesus as well as we thought we did. And that might lead us to change and frankly we are not very good at change.

In popular culture today, an epiphany is just a general term for a sudden life-changing realization. "I just had an epiphany," somebody might say, "I realized that if two people on opposite ends of the earth simultaneously dropped a piece of bread, the entire earth would briefly become a sandwich." Well, that is maybe not a great example of a *life-changing* realization but it is one that can really change the way you look at something. An epiphany – a real life-changing realization – sounds pretty exciting and it is. But changing how you look at everything actually is a pretty scary proposition.

This festival is a reminder that God does, from time to time, like to send his people an epiphany. I'm not sure what new realizations God might be sending our way, but I am pretty sure that if this church (and the church in general) is going to grow, it will only be by attracting people who are significantly different from the people who are already here. And when they come, they will ask us some awkward question that frighten us and send us back to our scriptures. That is as it should be. What we find there, and how we respond to it, may well bring us to the next great epiphany that God has for us.