

Not the Magi or the Star. It's about the child.

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Scripture: Jeremiah 33: 14-16

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Commenting on this week's Gospel of Matthew reading, Karoline Lewis focuses the impact of Jesus' birth on the person who seemed to have the most power: When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.¹

She goes on by inviting us to consider that when a person in power fears their competition, as here, Herod, no different than modern-day people in power; he feels insecure, largely because he sees his authority as deriving from a simplistic system of only winners and losers.

Know any insecure leaders in our modern time who likely act out of insecurity?

This story of the Magi making a pilgrimage, following a star, in order to pay homage to an infant king is a powerful story. But the core message, the radical message of good news for us, is born in that manger, isn't it. Hold the image of that holy infant born in a animal feeding trough alongside the image of a ruthless King Herod and you have two systems that could not be more different. One authority comes from dominance over all; and if that king shows vulnerability, he feels that he will lose their power. The other authority defies human values and system; an authority whose very beginning is the definition of a love that is infinite, whose strength is grounded in vulnerability, a holy love that never ends.

The Message is the Child. A holy birth was deeply yearned for by the Jewish tradition. For Matthew, deeply grounded in Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus' birth is the fulfillment of a collective yearning expressed in that famous Isaiah passage:

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. [Isaiah 9]

Matthew's version of the story of Christ's birth also compels a group of Zoroastrian, Persian, scholars whose tradition also yearns for the birth of a Messiah. Funny how deeply embedded in our collective imagination is the image of three Magi – read again that story. There is no mention of a number – just plural, "Magi."

King Herod consulted his Jewish religious advisors. Those advisors knew their Hebrew Scriptures, and told Herod that Scriptures foretold that a baby would be born in Bethlehem. They know the story, but do you notice that they don't go themselves?

This is a recurring theme for Matthew's Gospel; that God's "chosen" people, the Jewish leaders, miss the point while the non-Jews, Gentiles, the outsiders, aliens, seem to be God's go-to instruments of grace and hospitality.

¹ *Following a Star*. Karoline Lewis, "Dear Working Preacher" <https://www.workingpreacher.org/>, Jan 1/19

The question on this Epiphany Sunday is this: Where is the Good News for you in this story of a power-hungry and insecure king unsuccessful in his efforts to manipulate those Magi, and then the image of those Persian pilgrims paying homage, bowing down, prostrating themselves before a foreign infant king?

Maybe you and I will find our Good News message in how we each understand power and authority exercised today.

When we feel most disempowered, helpless, even hopeless, where do we find hope? Many of us learned from an early age that, ultimately, we need to draw from deep within ourselves to make it in the world. Sure, we might be taught to lean on family, friends. But it is our own agency that will help us prevail. The Protestant work ethic. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!

To journey with those Magi and pay homage to, bow down to, the infant Jesus, the embodiment of God's love, might be an invitation to open our clenched fists, to step back from our ambitions, our hopes and dreams, and to reflect on God's message to all of us, arriving this way; a tiny infant rather than an awe-inspiring king in shining armour. It is a call to all of us to embrace the call to remember we are mere human, but if we depend on God, nothing is impossible.

As we come to partake in Holy Communion in a few minutes, we are invited to embrace the values of Jesus, especially the ethic of love that resists the temptation to aspire to power and authority as the world gives.

Instead, as Paul puts it so eloquently in 1 Corinthians chapter 13:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal... Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud... Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. [1 Corinthians 13: 1, 4, 6-7]

Unfortunately we too often see bombastic and insecure leaders either celebrated or attacked in our public discourse. I think our Epiphany journey is to model in OUR lives the love and vulnerability that grounds courageous Christian living.