

Having Been Warned

Epiphany Sunday – 1/8/23

They were warned, were they? By an angel in a dream, not to return to Herod? Thus the story has come down to us in Matthew's gospel. It is our only source for this scene, as for all the early scenes in the gospel texts regarding the various kings named Herod who lorded it over the lands where God chose to become flesh and dwell among us. Various Herods ruled those lands, that is, until they grew so incompetent and corrupt that Rome had to step in directly, run Judea with careerist bureaucrats from the eternal city itself. That meant a tractable, if still an occupying, army, but it also means placing the religious and political tinderbox that is and ever has been Jerusalem to men who could not have cared less about what any Jew in the world thought, wanted, feared, hoped-for, or would die to resist or prevent. After all that came crashing down in fire, siege, rebellion, smoke, and exile, the Christians who wrote this gospel remembered that the savior of the world, the Messiah, the Christ, had also been born of the line of David, and was, no matter what else he was, their only and eternal One True King.

So much was he this, Matthew's gospel tells us, that wise men from the East – what wise men? How far east? – saw a star at its rising the moment he was born. They knew at once exactly what it meant, and quickly got together what they needed to make a journey to see it – see him, see this, the fulfillment of all their desires and hopes and dreams.

These were well-educated people descended, at least in part, from one or more of the Jewish communities that had gone into exile after the demise of the divided kingdoms but who had not returned when the King of Persia had allowed them to. They stayed, rather, as not-quite-strangers in a not-quite-strange land, blending their

knowledge of the ancient Jewish scriptures with the up-to-the-minute astronomical and astrophysical insights of Persia, and gradually becoming Persians. For them, the land of Israel existed more as a mythic ideal than as a place of earth, a Tír na nÓg in all but name.¹ It was the home of the gods and the dead, of youth, beauty, health, and promise – a land of promise, a Promised Land if you will: a once-and-future paradise in which would dwell, one day, the One True King, descended of the line of David unsullied and incorruptible. This king would not fail to keep what he conquered, as had the Maccabees. He would not waste in stupidity what he'd been given in abundance, like Solomon's successor Rehoboam *inter alia*. This king would not be faithless before God, as so many of the rulers of the divided kingdoms had been. He would not be a despot in thrall to emperors, and as the Grecianed, scheming Herods had become. He would be the real thing, the answer to all their questions, and the response, at long last, to their prayers.

The magi who got on their camels and journeyed west, having gathered such wealth as they could, came from these communities. Persian, Jewish, wealthy, wise, but not yet satisfied with what life had showed them. They had to be all these things to care, from that far away, about anyone born king of the Jews. They knew enough of the Hebrew scriptures to be able to read them by the light of the Avesta and the stars. They knew enough of the world as it is to know why one would want to. Nor Pharisee nor Sadducee was likely to have accepted them as truly faithful to the One True God, and they did not try to make them do so. They knew who they were and what they wanted; all they needed was a timeline and a compass heading. Once they had both, they knew where to go, and when, and why. They got on their camels,

¹ For more information on this key feature of Irish mythology, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%ADr_na_n%C3%93g.

gathered their wealth, and headed west, following the brightest star they'd ever seen. If everything you wanted suddenly appeared somewhere, wouldn't you?

Medieval Christians, like their carols, named them “kings” – following the verse from 3rd Isaiah that we heard today: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” – but these men were not kings. Could three kings leave three kingdoms for well over a year – seeking another king, no less – and have anyone to rule over once they returned? No. Far more likely is it that they were magi in the precise sense: priests in the religion of Zoroaster, or Zarathustra, the dominant religion of the Persian empire for more than a thousand years.² They had reached a status in which they could be spared, or at least not missed, for a year or more. They likely lived according to the precepts of their religion as well as anyone could: “Good thoughts, good words, good deeds” was the bumper-sticker precis of their faith. It included learning whatever could; being charitable and kind; making people happy by not being kept in want or held in disdain; doing good for goodness' sake, not in hopes of reward; and understanding women as equal partners with men in the struggle for good and against evil. As their religion understood it, good and evil were equally-matched and cosmically-opposing forces – and though good they believed would triumph in the end, it could not do so without people's choosing to make it happen, and organizing themselves to make it do so. As good is to evil, in their thought, so order was to chaos. The better people were, the more well-ordered, safe, and reliable their lives would be. However, the more people chose evil, the more often would chaos break out, and the more decay would set in.

The magi who headed west to follow a star had seen evidence of both under the sun. They knew that people could be glorious or terrible. They knew that people could

² For more information on Zoroastrianism, see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism#Classical_antiquity.

created systems of vast organization and complexity, duty and responsibility, to make whole civilizations rich and fulfilling. They also knew that people could make each others' lives nasty, brutish, and short in the midst of a war of each against all, as Thomas Hobbes termed in his *Leviathan* the state of existence most to be avoided. The magi hoped that this one who had been born king of the Jews would lead people, perhaps all people, to the former and away from the latter. They were wise enough to know that this would be good. But they also thought – and in this, may have not been so wise – that anyone with any sense would want that as well, even the king in Jerusalem whom this newborn king would replace. That's why they asked him right out loud, in front of witnesses, where the new king had been born. They thought he'd be happy, find his life complete in being able to hand earthly rule over to someone actually worthy of it, lay his burdens down at the feet of an infant, God's choice to make things right, finally and forever, now and for all time.

They could not have been more wrong about Herod or about those who had power in the Jerusalem he ruled. Those people did not want people's lives to get better under wise, benevolent, and charitable rule. They wanted a system that kept the few (themselves) rich, ignorant, and idle, and everyone else poor, ignorant, and exhausted. If the magi saw this in them, there is no record of it. Indeed, Matthew's gospel shows us that they took Herod's feigned piety for true. It was only after an angel warned them not to return to "that snake" and tell him where the child was that they had any inkling that all was not well, that not everyone would welcome the birth of the wisest ruler humanity would ever know.

It must've hit them like a hammer. There were people who did not want the beautiful dream to come true. There were people who did not want what Psalm 72 sang so powerfully about today to ever come to pass. Such people now ruled in Jerusalem, and would hurt or kill whomever they had to in order to make sure things never got

better. The magi from Persia had to accept all this at the very moment they saw their dream come true. The only thing they could do then, having left their gifts with Mary and Joseph and the baby, was to scurry home, the bright star receding over their shoulders, realizing that for good to triumph over the evil of this world, it would take more than a star, a child, clear insight into the human division, and the lifelong pursuit of a beautiful dream.

Good thoughts, good words, and good deeds would be necessary, but would not be enough. It would take – but they did not know what it would take. No-one did. No-one except God, that is, who knew that to perfect humanity, God would have to become humanity so that humanity – recalling the insight of St. Anselm – could become God.

If the magi realized that on their way back east, we have no record of it. But then, many of the texts from the ancient world have been lost, and whole libraries burned. Perhaps such insights were in one of them. All we know is: they came, they saw, they gave, and they left. For this, we still sing about them, and we should. *Amen.*