

January 9, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12

“Witnessing to the Threat and Promise of the Christ Child”

Epiphany marking the conclusion of the 12 days of Christmas with the visit of the Magi to the Christ Child on western Christian calendars is officially observed on January 6.

**However, here in the United States January 6 now has another association.**

January 6 is now also the date when one year ago a sore loser incited a violent insurrection during which our national capitol was stormed and desecrated, lawmakers' lives were threatened as they participated in their constitutional role certifying the results of the presidential election, and a number of people were killed and injured.

I lament this still painfully recent yet now historical and violent political association with the date of our American Christian Epiphany observance.

Yet the annual Epiphany reading from Matthew's Gospel reminds us that Jesus' nativity always had violent political as well as religious implications.

Jesus was born into a world in which his homeland was terrorized by a paranoid and evil puppet calling himself “king of the Jews” within the Roman Empire, which itself was ruled by an emperor who demanded to be worshiped as a god.

It's notable that after hearing there were Magi in Jerusalem asking around about a “*child who has been born king of the Jews*” and since he himself apparently did know something about a promised Jewish Messiah ruler descendant of David but not a birth location, Herod called together the chief priests and scribes to find out what their Scriptures had to say.

Receiving from them a version of Micah's prophecy that the promised Messiah shepherd ruler would come from Bethlehem but then, perhaps fearing the Jewish

scholars might join the caravan traveling there to worship the new *“king of the Jews”* and revolt against him, Herod summoned and met secretly with the Magi.

Hearing from them about the star they interpreted heralding a new ruler the Magi had observed from its rising and been following, Herod then confidentially shared with these foreign astrologers what he’d learned from the Jewish priests and scribes.

The “king of lies” then sent the Magi to Bethlehem with orders that if they found the child they were seeking to then come back and let him – with an implication of him and only him – know the location so that he, Herod, could *“also go and pay him homage.”*

I wonder whether the Magi really needed the warning in a dream not to return to Herod with the location of the Christ Child.

Perhaps before or after arriving in Jerusalem they had already heard enough about Herod to know he would find their pilgrimage seeking a child born *“king of the Jews”* threatening to his own rule serving at Rome’s pleasure.

Maybe that’s why rather than going directly to his palace with their inquiry Herod instead had to hear from others that there were Magi in town asking, *“where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”*

That Herod met with them in secret rather than joyfully summoning the Magi to hear from the Jewish scholars themselves about where the promised Messiah was to be born might have been an indicator that this paranoid king wouldn’t participate a peaceful transfer of power.

We like to focus upon the serene scene of the joyful Magi kneeling, worshiping, and presenting their lavish gifts to Jesus while Mary lovingly looks on.

We like to remember that from his birth Jesus was celebrated and worshiped by a diversity of people – wealthy foreign Magi and lowly despised shepherds, Jew and Gentile.

But as our Epiphany Gospel story continues beyond this morning's reading, we're told that after the Magi's worshipful visit to the Christ Child and their failure to return to Herod with his location, the evil puppet ruler, fearing being supplanted by a new "king of the Jews," then ordered the slaughter of all boys two years old and younger in the Bethlehem area.

In Matthew's Gospel this violent beginning foreshadows the brutal ending of Jesus' earthly life.

The religious and political powerful will join forces during the week we Christians call "holy" to condemn to death this "*child who has been born king of the Jews.*"

Yet then as now the promise of the Christ Child is that Divine Love ultimately prevails, bringing resurrection Light shining into and illuminating all the dark and hurting spaces of earthly human life.

For even on this side of Easter, we still live in the tension between threat and promise, be they political, economic, social, psychological, or spiritual.

The promise of the Christ Child is that even in the face of evil and violence people will speak truth to power at the risk of their own political or other careers in order to expose deliberate lies and to stand on the side of integrity and justice.

It's the promise that people who seek, follow, and worship before God's Divine Light will travel another way to shield the vulnerable.

And so, on days like January 6, 2021, other people embodying Divine Love will lead those who mean to do harm away from the threat, hold the line against invaders,

and suffer verbal and physical abuse to protect the vulnerable, and will return and clean up the destruction left behind.

Epiphany reminds us that our Emmanuel God-who-is-with-us cares about our times of joy and of sorrow, our times of fulfillment and of challenge.

It reminds us that we embody God's presence through our supporting and caring for one another.

We who embody such Divine presence and hospitality reflect the promise of the Christ Child and serve as a beacon for all who are hopefully seeking God's Light shining, leading, and guiding them through their own life and faith journeys.

As my former Presbyterian Mission Agency Board member and colleague, the Rev. Mihee Kim-Kort wrote in a "Sunday's Coming" reflection for *The Christian Century* magazine, *"Epiphanies come to us in all shapes and sizes: angels, stars, babies, water.*

*"They come in all sorts of moments: ordinary, simple, humble...sometimes, unexpected and bright.*

*"They come to us to show us how we might be changed deeply; they come to show us another road."*

Rev. Kim-Kort continues, *"Don't be afraid of being waylaid.*

*"Pause before that epiphany moment – take that other road with courage and hope as God shapes a bright new reality in us, one that is rich with God's grace."*

This Epiphany let us begin reclaiming the promise of the Christ Child for January 6 and for every other day of the year.

To God be the Glory!

Amen.

**Our Carol of Response is # 145 "What Child Is This."**