

“Visited”

Matthew 2:1-23

EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

January 6, 2019

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

How appropriate is it to begin a new year
and a new season on the church's
liturgical calendar with the festival day
of the Epiphany of our Lord and
its assigned text- the visit of the maji
and the holy family's flight to Egypt.

The origins of the Epiphany festival are obscure.

As the name Epiphany suggests,
the festival seems to have focused from
its beginnings on the 'revelation' of
God in the person of Jesus before the
Christmas festival was instituted

In other words, the early church was
seeking to answer popular as well as
derisive questions as to the nature
and origin of Jesus of Nazareth and
the purpose for his life, ministry and
mission on earth.

January 6 traditionally marks the twelfth
day of Christmas and officially ends the season.

After today's worship, all of the Christmas
decorations will be removed and stored
away for the next season.

Many compliments were received on the
addition of the white-lighted Christmas
tree and hanging wreath which focally
united our celebration of Christ's birth below
with his death on the cross above.

This is in keeping with Matthew's gospel,
which attempts the same purpose with
the genealogy and birth of Jesus the Messiah

in the first chapter and continues the anticipation of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus with the second chapter's visitation of the magi or wise men. and first attempts on Jesus life by King Herod.

Today's singing of the Hymn of the Day or the Sermon Hymn as it used to be called, intentionally prepares worshipers for the message to follow.

The hymn "We Three Kings" was selected for its familiarity rather than its accuracy.

As a minor Christmas carol, "We Three Kings" is not without flaws.

The magi were not kings, and Matthew never says they were a trio.

Matthew simply tells his readers, "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem" (2:1)

They brought three gifts, implying that there were three givers.

The group was large enough that the report of their arrival reached King Herod himself.

So who and what are these magi, wise men and how do they fit into Matthew's opening proclamation of Jesus as "the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham"? (1:1)

As some of you heard me say from this pulpit during the preparatory season of Advent, chapter one's genealogy and Joseph's naming of Jesus established him as a 'son of Abraham', chapter two's visit of the magi and King Herod's homicidal homage functions to portray Jesus as the son of David- the true King of the Jews, who will fulfill the prophetic promises to restore Israel from its spiritual exile and to draw Gentiles

into the kingdom.

This magi serve this purpose with their initial inquiring “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews” (2:2)?

As your pastor for the past three decades plus, I have served as a weekly voice interpreting scripture to enable us to understand who we are as God’s beloved people, why God’s love is vitally important, and how it can shape our lives and others by sharing it.

I have also established as an important aspect of my ministry with you the study of biblical books to provide a deeper appreciation for and comprehension of the word of God for our lives together as a local faith community.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to offer an eight week study of the book of Matthew, subtitled, The Church’s gospel.

At the outset of this bible study, I made this statement to those present,

“When we put the beginning and end of the first gospel together, we come to realize that Matthew covers the whole story of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures. He begins with a genealogy, using the word ‘genesis’ in the first verse. He concludes with a commission like King Cyrus’ that ends the Hebrew Bible’s last book II, Chronicles. Essentially, Matthew tells the story of Jesus as a re-telling of the story of Israel.”

The characters and events that are peculiar, in other words, only located in Matthew’s gospel continue the themes of chapter one-

Jesus is the kingly Messiah, his name implies that he will be a helper in God's plan for salvation, God has directed Jesus, birth and will protect him from harm, and it is God's will to include Gentiles in the kingdom of heaven.

Chapter two will continue some of these themes while presenting contrasting reactions to the birth of this messianic king from the perspective of the magi who wants to worship him and provide him with gifts that will guide both the child's immediate and far-ranging future and from the perspective of the Jew's present ruler, the Roman appointed Herod who perceives the Christ child as a threat and wants to kill him.

Both of these reactions will become more evident throughout the rest of Matthew's gospel.

Let us look together to see how Matthew's presence and presents of the magi intimate Gentiles inclusions; how Jesus the Messiah King and King Herod are in conflict, how the mentioned and alluded to prophecies confirm Jesus identify, and how God guides and protects Jesus from the beginning.

The identity of the magi is a matter of debate.

Church tradition as well as contemporary Christmas carols, cards, and pageants depict three opulent wise men of kingly stature, Matthew attempts to reveal their place of origin and their occupation of star-watchers as being gentiles hailing from the East.

Scholars have regarded them to be a priestly caste of astrologers who were wise in interpreting the stars and hailing from one of four possible countries- Arabia, Babylon, Egypt, and Persia.

The main thing is that they were well acquainted

with Jewish messianic expectations, and all four areas has significant Jewish populations.

While I have never read it in a scholarly journal or commentary, my educated guess (that I have harbored for some time) suggests to me the magi may have come from Babylon.

Two reasons suggest this:

first, from the Old Testament book of Daniel, we learn that the prophet and his friends were called magi: men steeped in knowledge, seeking the truth, and serving a royal advisors or counselors;

secondly, David live in Babylon as part of the generation of Jews in exile and desiring to be restored to their homeland.

Through Magi's like Daniel, Matthew's magi has access to the teaching of the prophets like Isaiah who foresaw "a procession of nations to Zion", of kings bearing gifts of gold and frankincense" and Micah's mandate regarding a royal birth in Bethlehem.

From this background, Matthew's magi seek Jesus the Jewish King to pay true homage by worshipping and giving him gifts, and they also serve to prefigure Jesus own mission to include Gentiles while also restoring his own people from their spiritual exile that began in Babylon.

Turning to Herod, when the magi ask for information about "the one who has been born king of the Jews, "Matthew portrays Herod's response as one of panic and agitation over this potential rival to his throne.

Throughout his entire earthly ministry in Matthew's gospel, Jesus will endeavor to establish his messianic authority in his preaching, teaching, and healing, despite

his rejection by the religious establishment.
The repeated emphasis on Herod as king,
and his power to eradicate rivals even
by infanticide indicates that Matthew's
claims for Jesus as the true Messiah-King
who will restore Israel from its present
exile under Rome's puppet king.

For Matthew, Jesus is the Messiah or
"King of the Jews" whose followers obey his
teachings and whose enemies use the
title to harangue and ultimately hang him
from a cross.

Throughout Matthew's birth narrative
chapter one and two of his gospel,
divine protection and guidance are signaled
by communication through dreams and
angels as well as the appearance of a star.

It is striking that Jesus, the true king
in contrast to Herod, is not described by
Matthew by active verbs in the birth account.

Instead, he is acted upon: Herod tries to
kill him, the magi worship him, Joseph
takes him and his mother to safety, and
the prophets testify to him.

Accent falls on the theme of divine protection:
God watches over the true, yet vulnerable,
Messiah-King.

Matthew ends his birth narrative with an
explanation point with the 23rd verse:
"There he made his home in a town called Nazareth,
so that what had been spoken through the prophets
might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean"

Though this passage is introduced as another
fulfillment quotation, it is likely that Matthew
is providing a wordplay to connect Jesus' hometown
with his identity as the Messiah.

The Hebrew word for "branch" sounds much like

Nazareth.

The association of David's 'branch' in Isaiah 11:1
with messianic hope and the restoration of Israel
is well attested in Jewish writings

Matthew's original audience of Jewish Christians
would have caught this wordplay connection
between Nazareth and the Messiah.

Matthew concludes his telling of the story of
Jesus's birth just as he began it, by emphasizing
Jesus as Messiah, Son of David,
the hope of Israel's restoration.

Beloved people of God,
the proper response to Jesus the Messiah is worship.

The greatest gift we can offer him is ourselves
in love, obedience, and service of his kingdom
which continues this day in communities like ours

The one who gave all of himself,
we like the magi before us come to worship Jesus,
and see the glory of God that has visited us.

Amen