

Epiphany 2019  
St. Brendan's Anglican Church  
Rev. Doug Floyd

Wise men from the land of the rising sun follow the light of the world into the dark corridors of Jerusalem. The heavens declare the glory of a newborn king of the Jews. Troubled by this news, Herod the king inquires about a coming Messiah. He even asks the magi to bring him word of this wondrous child. Herod seeks to eliminate this threat to his power. The magi seek to worship this long-awaited child.

This story has often been read in light of Psalm 72,

<sup>10</sup> May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands  
render him tribute;  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts!

<sup>11</sup> May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations serve him!

In this reading, the wise men, the magi become kings of the east falling down before the last king of Israel. Psalm 72 was most likely written for King Solomon the prince of peace. While his reign did bring a long desired peace to the people of Israel, it also set in motion the idolatry and the seeds of civil war, which would eventually break the kingdom in half under his son.

Centuries later, Isaiah will sing of another king who is coming to restore Israel after her eventual decline and exile.

<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

<sup>7</sup> Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this. (Is 9:6-7)

The Gospel writers proclaim that Jesus is this very king, this long-awaited prince of peace. The magi, the wise men, the spiritual and philosophical leaders of their lands come in search of this king, this long promised ruler who will bring peace to the nations. On Epiphany, we celebrate this glorious unveiling of Jesus to the nations. This is the story of the Gentiles who have been invited to worship alongside the Jews. In Christ, the two have become one new man.

This simple story of the wise men has captured the imagination of the church across the ages. Last week, Kelly was talking with the children about the nativity and asking who was present. The typical shepherd, sheep and wise men were mentioned. Then Paul and Joyce's granddaughter suggested a crocodile or possibly a teddy bear. She was actually doing what people have always done. They've bought this story into their world and their time.

Throughout the middle ages, artists told this story in paintings, sculptures, and altar pieces. As we survey the paintings from this period, we get a sense of how this story was read. By pausing over these pictures, we begin to get a sense of how people reflected upon this story.

First, let's consider the setting. Eastern art typically depicts the newborn Jesus in a cave. He is born in a cave and he will be buried and resurrect from a cave. In this telling, his birth and death are bound together in image. All of human life is captured in this simple picture. Christ redeems us in the cradle, the grave, and the empty tomb: from birth to death to new life.

Western art often depicts Jesus in a ruins of a castle: sometimes the stable appears to be the last remains of an ancient kingdom. Jesus has come to restore the Solomon's Kingdom and reestablish the House of David. The world itself has grown weary under the oppressive rule of wicked kings. Herod is but one example of a long line of rulers who crush the weak, lead the world into war, and continue the long tyranny of sin and death. Jesus comes as the true king of Israel and the king of above kings.

In many paintings, the world appears dark and stormy and the only light in the painting is coming from the baby Jesus. Jesus is the light to a world cloaked in darkness.

The setting of the pictures is sometimes in the middle of the city, sometimes in a field, sometimes in front of the sea, and sometimes in the middle of the forest. There are usually hills or mountains in the background. Sometimes a diorama is built of an entire village. People working, eating, farming, living. In this middle of the village, Jesus is born. The setting often communicates that Jesus has come to our town. He was born just over the hillside. Come and behold him. In this sense, Jesus has entered into our stories. His story is not simply a story from two thousand years ago, but it is contemporary. He is still entering into our stories as the prince of peace with healing in his wings.

What are people doing in these paintings? They are bowing before him. Worshipping and praying. They are giving gifts. Many times there are long lines of people or crowds of people pressing in from every side. All humanity is pressing in, longing, reaching, bowing, worshipping the Lord of the ages.

Who is in pictures? Mary and Jesus are almost always the central figures in the picture. Joseph is usually present. The wise men appear sometimes as kings or wealthy rulers and sometimes as bearded figures or even what appears to be druids. The Shepherds sometimes appear alongside the wise men or in the background. Religious leaders are often depicted. Cardinals in red or monk in brown robes. An adult John the Baptist shows up on occasion pointing to the baby Jesus. Sometimes the common people are pressing in from the edges of the scene and sometimes they are in the middle of the scene. Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicts only common people pressed into the scene the nativity in a village building.

As I meditate on the Biblical story and on the story told through paintings, I am struck by the interruption of this birth. Everyone's life is changed. The poet John Terpestra writes a *Song for Joseph* and captures this surprise that alters the world. He writes,

I'm asking , which birth is ever

*truly expected, and does not shatter  
each expectation it fulfilled,  
in an experience of blood and flesh  
and cries  
that voice the earth belaboured*

*to such extreme, by passage  
that both pushes and resists  
our lower case I am?*<sup>1</sup>

Every birth even when expected, alters the family and the world in unexpected ways. Our own sense of self and self sovereignty is challenged by the crying baby. How much more so when the Son of God comes? Even as Israel expected the coming of Messiah, or the King of the Jews, they do not, cannot expect His coming. He challenges their understanding of what a king is and who they are as God's chosen people. And some will bow before the infant king and some will seek to kill him as a child or later as an adult.

The story of Herod points to this threat. He will not bow but seeks the Son to kill him. In the end, Herod will be crushed under his own wickedness. And to some extent, all of us may seek Jesus as little Herod's. The true king of Israel, the true savior and not the savior of our imagination will call us to the cross, call us to bow, call us to let go of our own expectations of self glorification and self satisfaction. All must be yielded and given back in worship to the Savior.

Even as we lift our voices in worship and our hands in prayer, we may be opposing the King Jesus in our hearts and refusing to bow to His Lordship. And yet, he is gentle and even while leading us to the place of the cross, the place of humiliation. He leads to the cross in the way of His love. This great theme comes through in George MacDonald's novel *Lillith*. Everyone must sleep in the house of death. Whether they choose to submit or run away, they eventually will sleep there. Jesus tells those whom he loves, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Mt 16:24

The wise men speak to us of a different kind of seeking. There appears to be a deep longing that drives their search. They are willing to abandon their lands and travel far away along treacherous paths to follow the star and find the child king. TS Eliot reimagines this difficulty in his poem, *Journey fo the Magi*,

*A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter."  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
This was all folly.<sup>2</sup>*

Some of you may know those voices crying, “This was all folly.” Even though their deep longing compelled them to go, they still walked a difficult path and faced many hardships. Our life of faith might be thought of as walking the path of our deepest desire to the Lord Jesus who called us from birth. And yet, there were and are days we may have regretted, struggled, worried, doubted, feared.

As I look at these wise men, I hear the story of the longing heart that is restless until it rests in God. Our desires take shape in the most basic of drives for food and sex and rest. But also in desires to create, to build, to marry, to raise a family. We also long for goodness, truth, and beauty. Though sin can lead us astray in our desires, the Lord also calls to us through our longings.

To those in a dark place, He is the light of the world.

To the boy caring for his animals, He comes as the True Shepherd

To the heart longing for wisdom and truth, He is the very embodiment of all Truth and Wisdom.

To the ruler, he is the true king of all kings.

To the artist as the Beautiful One.

He comes as the fulfillment of the hearts longing while simultaneously enlarging the heart’s grasp. For our weak and deficient desires cannot limit his glory, his beauty, his wisdom, his truth. He is greater than all we could hope or imagine. Following Jesus will always mean letting go, bowing down, submitting, and offering all even our failures back to him in worship.

On this day of Epiphany, we turn once again to the Savior of our souls and we worship. We are here because He has invited us here. He has gathered us to himself. We offer ourselves in worship, we offer our hopes and dreams and desires and at the same time, we offer our weakness and failures and fears.

We cry

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,  
who was and is and is to come!” Re 4:8.

and

<sup>11</sup> “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things,  
and by your will they existed and were created.” Re 4:11.

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<sup>1</sup> “A Song for Joseph” by John Terpstra in *Poetry as Liturgy: An Anthology of Canadian Poets*, ed by Maergo Swiss, The St. Thomas Poetry Series, Toronto: 2006 (pp. 47-49).

<sup>2</sup> “The Journey of the Magi” by T.S. Eliot at <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/journey-magi>.