

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Epiphany Sunday
Sunday, January 7, 2024
10am

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Theme: Those who dream...persevere

[prayer]

We began this Advent-Christmas season with rumors of apocalypse. We end with an epiphany.

Both are a form of revelation. Apocalypse is revelation by unraveling and transforming. At the end of time, God's kingdom will be made complete through the remaking of creation. This unraveling is already underway. It began at the advent of Jesus two thousand years ago and it continues today. God is already transforming the world through you and me and all those who have chosen to follow the Way of Jesus. This is the effect of discipleship – a world gradually remade through hearts and lives transformed by the Gospel.

Epiphany is a different kind of revelation – revelation through insight. Our understanding is illuminated by the light of Christ. With this light we can see ourselves and our world more clearly. We can also see God's dream for creation and the inbreaking of His kingdom more clearly. Sometimes this insight happens suddenly, like the flip of a light switch. Other times it happens gradually, like the sky slowly lightening at dawn.

The birth of Jesus was both apocalypse and epiphany. It signaled the beginning of the unraveling of the old order. It also marked the dawn of a reformed understanding of who God is and what God wants for His creation. The heavenly sign that led the magi west from their foreign land was a herald of things to come. Like an apocalypse, the news it portended could be good or bad, depending on what you had to gain...or what you had to lose.

This was certainly the case for King Herod. Herod the Great was one of history's more notorious tyrants – petty, jealous, ruthless toward his political enemies. He was an Edomite, descended from the line of Esau (remember Jacob's twin brother who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew?). Although Herod was a Jew, the people questioned his legitimacy as king because he was not from the line of Jacob (a claim that Jesus possessed). Herod was also a client king of Rome, which meant he ruled Judea on behalf of Caesar – a tool of the occupier. This made him unpopular, which only tempted him to grasp that much harder for power and control. At the root, Herod was a deeply insecure human being, and his insecurity made him dangerous.

When the caravan of foreigners from the East ambled into Jerusalem and the cry went up that they were looking for the King of the Jews, Herod thought they had come to honor him. Imagine his embarrassment, and then his displeasure, when the magi had the audacity to tell him that no, they had come for someone else, some other King of the Jews. This stoked Herod's fear, and all of Jerusalem with him. Herod feared the loss of his power to someone with a stronger claim to the throne. Jerusalem feared what he might do to keep that throne.

Despite the song, Matthew does not call the magi kings or even say how many there were. They were likely Zoroastrian priests and philosophers from the Parthian Empire – educated men and women, seekers of knowledge who had divined through their astrology that a great sociopolitical change was underway in Palestine. They traveled an awfully long distance in search of an answer to a question that seemed to have very little to do with them. Parthia was Rome's military rival at the time, so the magi's presence in Jerusalem was naturally unsettling even without them stirring up trouble in Herod's court. Like the star, their foreign tongue and foreign religion was an omen – an omen of joy for the whole world, if we let it be. They became the first Gentiles (non-Jews) to witness Christ, foreshadowing the inclusion of all of humanity in God's plan of salvation.

Epiphany is about the manifestation of a king whose origins upset our royal expectations. When the magi arrived at the home of Jesus, they didn't discover a mature rival lounging in splendor, but a toddler, playing on a dirt floor, with parents who lived hand to mouth. It's a preposterous image of royalty. Even more astonishing is that the magi accepted this tableau as true. "Falling to their knees, they honored him" (v. 11 CEB). Herod and his scribes and priests – the political

and religious establishment of Jerusalem – refused to acknowledge Jesus for fear of what his coming meant. But these foreigners accepted Jesus at face value. They persevered on foot for hundreds of miles with nothing more than their belief in the stars. And when they reached their goal, they did what faith is supposed to do: They let it change them.

This infant boy was not *their* king. The magi did not share a culture or a religion with Jesus. They did not owe him any allegiance. Why *not* give him up to Herod? What did it even matter to them? But instead, the magi were so changed by what they saw that they bowed down in reverence. They then kept the secret of Jesus's location. Their decision bought time for Mary and Joseph to leave the country as refugees and save the life of God incarnate.

Contrast their reaction with King Herod's. Read a little further in Matthew, and we learn that Herod, like Pharaoh, ordered the slaughter of all the male babies under two years old in Bethlehem. Scholars debate whether this massacre really occurred, but the historicity of the story is beside the point. Matthew wants us to understand this: There are people who will use violence to resist God's coming kingdom – a kingdom where the first will be last and the last will be first. Already the great light that shines from the manger was casting a shadow, and that shadow lay in the shape of a cross.

Then, and now, the revelation of God in Jesus is received as one of two things: God entering the world on behalf of all human beings, but especially those on the margins of society and power; or God as a threat to the people who would exercise power and control over humanity.

The artist of our sermon image, Hannah Garrity, writes,

“The power of fear is palpable; it is easy for a leader to share and to use to his advantage. In this story we are reminded of the wisdom that has been gifted to us by God through Jesus' ministry—the wisdom to avoid imbibing and stoking fear...Can we combat the fear within ourselves—to see beyond it to the love and hope that are also held in every moment? With each decision, we first choose our

lens. Can we make it our intention to see the world through love, not through fear?”¹

Meanwhile, Benjamin Cremer, a former pastor at Cathedral of the Rockies in Boise, wrote this recently, “Our Christianity should sound like ‘the world is full of neighbors to be understood and loved,’ not ‘the world is full of enemies to be feared and conquered.’”² When I review the history of our faith, I see Christians making a lot of decisions out of fear masquerading as power and control. I see it in present-day American Christianity, especially. As the racial, cultural, and religious makeup of our country continues to shift, we are tempted to hold onto power and control that is not ours. This grasping is not the Way of Jesus. Jesus asks us to give up our control, take up our cross, and follow Him. Beware the leaders who would manipulate you with fear. Remember that “There is now no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear...The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

As we journey into another potentially turbulent year, I think the words of both Ms. Garrity and Rev. Cremer are especially prescient. Will we be like Herod and use our fear to manipulate and control others? Will we be like Jerusalem and bow to the fear-based violence of others? Or will we be like the magi and choose a different way? Will we let the revelation of Jesus change us?

If you want to share in God’s dreams for our world, then choose this day what you will worship: Fear or love. Persevere in hope, faith, and love. If you find yourself acting out of fear toward your neighbor, orient yourself back to the Christ Child, whose humility is the basis of his power. Let the epiphany of his presence light your way.

Amen.

¹ Hannah Garrity. Artist’s statement for “Another Road.” Inspired by Matthew 2:1-12. Paper lace. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

² <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=989659429084&set=a.503905523804>