

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law he asked them where the Christ was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Scared

God---
I’m scared
I feel funny
On my insides
I wish you wus here.
Maybe if I could help somebody
I’d feel better on the insides
Just doing one good thing
For a change—
Help me do it, God.

(from Treat Me Cool, Lord: Prayers of Kids from City Streets)

“Gifts for the Journey”

“Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected”

Jonathan Edwards

In his commentary, ‘Nine Miles Off’, Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote: The wise men story line and plot come from Isaiah 60, a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 560 B.C.E. These Jews had been in exile in Iraq for a couple of generations and had come back to the bombed-out city of Jerusalem. They were in despair. Who wants to live in a city where the towers are torn down and the economy has failed, and nobody knows what to do about it? In the middle of the mess, an amazing poet invites his depressed discouraged contemporaries to look up, to hope and to expect everything to change. “Rise, shine, for your light has come.” The poet anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. ‘Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn . . . Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration. God has promised to make the city work effectively in peace, and a promise from God is very sure.’ Like Matthew, the wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem and to take rare spices, gold and myrrh and frankincense. Most important, they know that they will find the new king of all peace and prosperity (Christian Century, Dec. 2001, p. 15).

What the wise men didn’t know was that they were using the wrong text as their GPS guide. When God had spoken to the people in Jerusalem through Isaiah in 560 B.C.E, the city had failed to become a blessing for God. The appropriate text for the new thing that God was doing in Jesus as Prince of Peace came from the prophet Micah 5:2-4, “But you, O Bethlehem . . . “Here, Micah’s is the ‘voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring peace to his people, not by great political ambition, but by

attentiveness to the folks on the ground' (ibid). A leader who will do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6).

The Wise Men's search for the King of the Jews was set within a dangerous political environment. It highlights the political wars that exist in every generation between two kinds of human communities: Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Jerusalem is the human community which seeks prestige, acquires wealth, and accumulates power through fear and harmful acts of terror. Bethlehem, on the other hand, is a human community of neighborly love in which the power of God is glorified through the establishment of non-violent, just relationships of compassionate care. 'But out of you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people" (Mt. 2:4-6).

O Little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee light.

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, silent stars go by,

Yet in thy dark street shineth, the everlasting light.

The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight.

The hopes? God was rejecting both Herod as king and Jerusalem as seat of God's glory and might. For the first time in a very long time believers sitting in the darkness of evil could envision an end to oppression, tyranny, and injustice. The fears? Fear spread over the defenseless peasants of Bethlehem and seized the hearts of Jesus' family. They knew all too well what human beings can do in the face of a table turning change of power and control. Worse yet, for Bethlehem innocents that nightmare of evil came true. 'When king Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi" (Mt. 2:). Jesus survived the slaughter but the fear of it remained. It clung to doubting moments of faith. It struck as bone deep terror when his heart felt faint. It twisted his soul with agony in the Garden of Gethsemane.

The fear of being harmed accompanied Jesus as inner threat and outward reality throughout his life long journey of being and becoming God's Shepherding King. I often wonder if psalm 23 was one of his favorites for relieving his inner fears. 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want . . . even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me . . .' But when it comes to the relieving of fears of being harmed in the real world, the American folk hymn haunts me. . . Jesus walked this lonesome valley, he had to walk it by himself, for nobody else could walk it for him, he had to walk it by himself. . . I don't like the truth of it that no human being was able to take his place and suffer the fearful violence and deadly evil for him. I don't like the spirit of helplessness that must have overwhelmed those who wanted to save him from death. But what I do like is faith's antidote to that human experience of helplessness that the gospel writer sneaks in at the very end of his Wise Men story: 'On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother and they bowed down, worshiped him and gave him gifts.' Even though they could not accompany him on his dangerous journey of becoming Israel's Shepherd, what they could do was give him gifts to sustain him on the way: gold for sustenance; myrrh for burial anointing; frankincense for healing of wounds. As gifts from God, they were exactly what Jesus would later need to help him through the worst moments in his life.

Some 2000 years after the first Magi visit, those who love God are still offering up gifts to help those who sit in the darkness of helplessness and overwhelming fear. Thankfully, these gifts of healing, sustenance, and anointing come in an unlimited variety of beautiful packages that can be opened up at any time to meet the need that arises. That's why it made my heart glad last Sunday when life threatening terror seized the hearts of Priscilla's loved ones. . .and, as church 'Wise Ones', we offered gifts of prayer, comforting presence, hugs, rides, and assistance seeking phone calls to accompany the family during a most terrible moment in their lives. By the grace of God we gave what we had. So, what do you think? Is what Edwards said true? Is grace but glory begun, and is glory but grace perfected?