



BAPTISM AND EPIPHANY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, January 4, 2009 (Epiphany begins January 6, 2009)

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Lection - Matthew 2:1-12; Galatians 3:23-28 (New Revised Standard Version)

Matthew 2:1-12

(v.1) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, (v. 2) asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” (v. 3) When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; (v. 4) and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. (v. 5) They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: (v. 6) ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for

from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel’.” (v. 7) Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. (v. 8) Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” (v. 9) When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. (v. 10) When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (v. 11) On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (v. 12) And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Galatians 3:26-28

(v. 26) For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (v. 27) As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (v. 28) There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Epiphany, like the month of January, is bathed in new beginnings. Advent and Christmas have ended, and we are faced with new resolutions that will challenge us to rethink old thoughts and views. Epiphany arrives, announcing that a new kingdom is coming, an inauguration of a transforming power that gives birth to a new kind of world.

During Epiphany, our brothers and sisters in the Eastern Church commemorate the baptism of Jesus, reminding us that change is about death and rebirth—the death of the old and the resurrection of the new. The global church, both East and West, will celebrate this death and life of rebirth by ushering in a new kingdom, a kingdom that is united and baptized as one in Christ. In this kingdom, King Jesus is God’s ambassador in “whom God is well pleased.” As we are weeks away from the inaugural ceremony of a new president, the Epiphany reminds us that power changes hands. The newly born Jesus has the power. But, change does not happen overnight; it takes almost two years before the Magi arrive to the place where the star announces Jesus’ birth, and not everyone sees it. Yet, the Epiphany star reveals that a rebirth of a political world order is on its way. On this Sunday, churches celebrate not only the epiphany, birth, and baptism of Jesus, but our baptism into the life of Christ, causing a rebirth of our lives and the world.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Matthew 2:1-12; Galatians 3:26-28

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Change is all around us. Election 2008 was peppered with slogans of change - “Change We Can Believe in” and “Change is Coming.” What did these notions of change mean for those of us wanting change? Change in our eating habits; change in our relationships; change in our socio-economic status; and change in the way our government allocates its resources.

Despite the star risings, the global nightmare of inequity remains; the resistant strain of racism, sexism, classism and other “isms” continue to exist; and the unequal pay of those who are already impoverished threatens any announcement of a new humanity clothed in Christ. Even if the star of a global beloved community is rising in the East, Herod still sits defiantly on his throne, the Herod of predatory lending, human trafficking, and political corruption, just to name a few.

But, brothers and sisters, in spite of all of this, we see a new kingdom advancing. As Charles Dickens states in A Tale of Two Cities,¹ “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” While prophetic Magi from the East may awaken us to a change on the way, we may need to flee down a “different” path in order to experience it.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The wise men from the East arrived inquiring of the one who *was born* “King of the Jews.” The use of this title was personally significant given that in 40 B.C. the Roman Senate had declared *Herod* “King of the Jews.” Thus, when he heard that there was a child born with the same title, it troubled him. We might question why the birth of Jesus was a threat to Herod. Named governor of Galilee at the age of 25, Herod was chief administrator of the entire northern section of the country. Despite his power and material wealth, King Herod continuously feared that his status was in jeopardy. An ominous distrust of anyone who might aspire to take his throne led him to execute one of his ten wives, drown his brother-in-law and mother, and take the lives of three of his fourteen children. Unlike Herod, who murdered and fought for the title, this child whom the Wise Men sought would assume his status from birth, a birth that would usher in freedom and unity, a new way of being in the world.

Paul clearly believes that the coming of Christ abolishes all aspects of the law that does not pertain to a covenant of grace. The Galatian Christians were not slaves to the law but children of God, with all the rights and privileges of an heir. Those baptized “into Christ” share an intimate relationship with Christ, and Paul employs the metaphor of clothing oneself with Christ to emphasize that relationship. This clothing characterizes baptism as evidence of a “re-birth” in the life of the believer. Baptized believers are incorporated into Christ, and Paul demonstrates that baptism is the indication that *all* people may share in God’s grace because “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” The grace of God does not discriminate on the basis of race, class, gender, for all “are one in Christ Jesus.” Being clothed with Christ, that is, spiritually reborn, ushers in a new way of relating to one another in the world. There are no longer divisions, but a unity in Christ; thus, there is oneness between Jews and Greeks, slaves and the free, and males and females. Destructive distinctions are destroyed through the birth of Christ and being baptized into him, challenging the usual order of things in society. His baptism and our rebirth through his baptism are the vehicles by which oneness in Christ is achieved. By rejecting categories of division, Paul abolishes all forms of discrimination because in Christ, a new world order is born.

While Jerusalem was disturbed over the announcement of the magi, the magi were focused on the revelation they had received. They were not concerned with the Jews reaction to their “sign” announcing the birth of the Messiah. Rather, they were there to pay homage to the One born to

be King of the Jews, the One who would serve notice that those who receive the “epiphany” of his arrival must travel by “another road” and be reborn in him.

Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., in his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,”² said 11 a.m. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America. He had vision as one baptized into Christ and clothed with Christ. By pointing out the conflict between racism and Christian ideals, King hoped to shame white church leaders into supporting the campaign against segregation in the South and racism in the rest of the country. Forty years later, Jim Crow segregation is a memory, and racism has become America’s most popular metaphor for evil. Yet King’s description of Sunday services remains largely unaltered.³ However, what Paul said to the church at Ephesus is still true, too: “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through and in all.”(Eph. 4:4) Thus, our baptism and re-birth in Christ should lead us to come together to advocate for the equality of all people and stamp out all forms of injustices, even if this is “the road less traveled.”

Celebration

Brothers and sisters, in Christ we have a common history and heritage. The epiphany of Christ and our baptism in him is the death-nail on the head of a death-dealing kingdom and the ushering in of a new kingdom. And what a rebirth! This kingdom is not like the Roman-sanctioned empire that divides those who are free and those who are slaves, those who are Jews and those who are Greek, Romans and barbarians, men and women. In this Kingdom, there is no East or West, male or female, bond or free. In this Kingdom, the outsiders, the Magi from the East, are first and Herod is last by his own choosing. In Christ, we are all one!

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The star the wise men see; a frightened and threatened King Herod; Herod talks secretly with the wise men; the joy on the faces of the wise men; the wise men enter the house where Mary and Jesus are; the wise men kneel down and pay homage to Jesus; the gold, frankincense, and myrrh the wise men bring as gifts; the wise men sneak away home on another road so they don’t have to return to Herod; gold brought as a gift for Jesus;

Sounds: The wise men ask for the location of the king of the Jews; King Herod talks with the chief priest and scribes about Jesus’ location; the flowing waters of baptism;

Smells: The dirt on the roads on which the wise men travel to Jerusalem and Bethlehem; the odors of the camels on which the wise men travel; the odor in the birth place of Christ; the refreshing smell of frankincense;and

Textures: The grimy feel of the ground on which the wise men kneel; and the smoothness of the treasure chests carrying gifts.

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

- Possible sermon titles based on Matthew text:

Deception versus Destiny;
Following Your Stars; or
Taking a Different Road

- Possible sermon title based on the Galatians text: Are You Clothed in Christ?

Notes

1. Dickens, Charles. A Tale of Two Cities. London: Chapman and Hall, 1859.
2. Bass, S. Jonathan. Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King, Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the “Letters from Birmingham. Chapel Hill, NC: Longleaf Services, UNC Press, 2002.
3. Western Michigan University Libraries. “Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1963 WMU Speech Found.” Archives and Regional History Collections. Online location: <http://www.wmich.edu/library/archives/mlk/q-a.html> accessed 30 August 2008