

Epiphany—Year C
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

And so, we come to the last piece of our **Christmas** story. **The Feast of the Epiphany**. The great *revealing*, the movement of *this* event *beyond* the confines of a family *out* into the world, the *personal* gone very, very *public*.

A cascade of images that draws us in. **Light** that *calls to us* when **thick darkness** has *swamped* us. **Light** that can capture the imagination of **the nations and the kings**. The capacity for **radiance** and the notion that **the heart that can still thrill and rejoice**.

There is the absolute *clarity* of the **psalmist**, mincing no words when it comes to **where God will put God's weight**. Values proclaimed grounded in **justice and righteousness**, *such justice deployed by the King on behalf of the poor*. **Mountains**, beloved **mountains**, to **bring prosperity to the people**, even **the hills to bring such righteousness**. The concept that **the needy are to be defended and the poor rescued**, that **those who cry out in distress and those who are oppressed**, those who **have no helper**, the understanding that *these are to be delivered from their distress*. The **psalmist** lays before us **the call to compassion for the lowly, the ones on the bottom**, and makes us see that **the poor and the lives of the needy are worth preserving, worth saving, worth making whole**. **Life matters to God**. **Lives are worth redeeming from violence and oppression**—and such **redeeming** will ask *us* to **lay something on the line**—**redemption is a full contact sport**. **Life is precious in God's sight**, and **God is all in with making whole** what is so broken. That's the essence of **salvation**—*reclaiming us for wholeness*.

And so, we begin to see why the events of **Matthew 2** get so dicey so quickly.

The **psalmist** describes **the righteous King**. The *type of King that God longed for*; the *type of King* who would **lay himself on the line to lift up the poor and needy and oppressed and those literally on the bottom**; *a King who lived from a place of deep compassion*. And, as the world shows us over and over again, *such a deep consciousness in a king is a rare thing*. *Most kings don't know* that **true power resides in one's depth of compassion**; that **true power resides in the capacity to yield**; that **true power resides in the capacity to let power move through you, sharing it with others and releasing it out into the world, not in the amount of power you can amass and hold**.

Exhibit A of amassing and holding power—King Herod.

It's interesting—the **wise men saw this star arise**, and **they knew something big was breaking into the world**; they **saw a sign that sent a deep resonance into their hearts**, and **they had to follow wherever it would lead**. **King Herod**, he **never saw the star because he was only tapped into the power of this world and not the power that transcends all of this**.

The wise men got as far as Jerusalem, but they couldn't quite find their way from there. I mean, travelling halfway across the world and **getting within 4 miles** is pretty daggone good—GPS doesn't always do that good. But I do wonder, *why* couldn't they follow **the star** at that point? Was it being *in that close of proximity* to that **crossroads of power—Jerusalem? Are there some spaces, some places that cloud the ability of our inner sight to see clearly?** Something to ponder.

But having gone as far as they could with **their mystical GPS**, these **wise men decided to stop and ask some directions from King Herod.** *However*, when they innocently said, **“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”**—this **struck fear in King Herod's heart** *because he understood himself as the king of the Jews*, and *sharing power with some infant upstart was not in his 5-year plan, in fact, it wasn't in his plan at all, ever.*

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him—the text says. *Nothing is more frightening to a people than a leader who is frightened and feeling threatened.* Herod called all the **religious leadership** together to sort out this **new Messiah being born** stuff. They *deployed their sacred tradition to tell this fearful King what he wanted to know.* Talk about a *cautionary tale* for those of us in **religious leadership—those in power often want the sacred to serve their ends.**

Facts in hand, **King Herod secretly called for the wise men**—*the machinations of power never seek out the transparent and the light, but always prefer the secret and hidden.* Herod drilled down deeper into **what the wise men knew and sent them on their way to Bethlehem**—**“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”**—nothing like *deploying worship in the name of fear.*

And though we don't get this piece of the story today, remember, before the end of this 2nd chapter of Matthew, Herod's fear will eventually lead him to kill all of the children under the age of 2 in and around Bethlehem just to protect his power.

Well, the **wise men set out**, and as soon as they **got out of Herod's presence, they could see the star again and follow its leading.** Sometimes, *we have to step out of the presence of powerful forces to regain our mystical sight and follow the leading of the stars and signs that God is always sending our way.*

The wise men tapped back into their intuitive wisdom and were **then able to follow that star**, and, indeed, **discern that it had stopped.** They could sense *that the place was here and now—and in that moment, the wise men were overwhelmed with joy. You know that space*, when you **have dropped down into your heart and touched that deepest wisdom that lives deep within you** and yet seems to come from beyond you, AND you come to that place where everything says, **“Stop, be still, it is here. Be fully present right here.”** That holy place that presses you down to your knees in gratitude and joy *because the need to worship has swept you off your feet.* That space that calls you to open every treasure chest you have and present your gifts *because the need to give is overwhelming.*

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. *Three gifts: gold*—that which is precious and valuable in this life; *frankincense*—the scent that carries our prayers and deepest longings; *myrrh*—the anointing spice that sanctifies and makes holy our death. From *the very beginning of our days*, our death is anticipated and rendered holy *casting its light back across every minute of our lives* reminding us that each and every moment all along the way is holy, too.

Offer the labor of your lives, offer the labor of your prayers, offer the labor that births you into this life *and* into the next one. *Offer all that you have and all that are and lay it at the feet of the Christ.* And know that *once you have done that, you simply cannot go home by the same road.*

The wise men knew that. A dream had come to them—“*Don’t return to Herod; don’t trust the king who clings to power for you have knelt before the King who places himself in our hands in complete vulnerability.*”

You have worshiped at the feet of justice and righteousness, mercy and compassion—you have to return to your life in the world walking down a completely different path. Herod cannot touch you in this place.

You have followed the star, now you must join it and shine this light all along the path because there are still people who walk in great darkness longing for light. There are still nations who long to stream toward a different center. There are still poor and oppressed and lowly folks in such great need who need delivering and lifting up, who long for wholeness.”

We who have followed the star have to heed the signs and symbols that *God is casting around us all of the time reminding us that the sacred crosses the realms and knows no bounds.* The cosmos is full of God and God’s glory, and stars *still* guide us and shoot across the sky to remind us that we are guided always and never left to navigate this world alone.

King Herod wears many masks and lives in every age, *but so do the wise men* who remind us that deep, intuitive, mystical wisdom lives in us all.

We are always given choices as to which king we will bow down and bend our knee. Today, let it be Christ, and let all the fear of Herod fall away. Amen.

The Rev. Cynthia K. R. Banks
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, Boone, NC
January 6, 2019