

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: January 3, 2021 Year B Using Epiphany readings

Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

Title: A Light Shining in a Dark World

Focus: The world which Jesus entered had darkness as does our own time. Epiphany is about recognizing Jesus as the light breaking into this darkness.

Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men[□] from the East came to Jerusalem, **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." **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah[□] was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

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.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men[□] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **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." **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. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped,[□] they were overwhelmed with joy. **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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

What Story Are You Expecting?

It is admittedly more difficult to preach without a congregation physically present. Of course, I have been doing so since the middle of March, so it is less odd than it used to be. From March to October, the congregation was represented by an iPhone camera on a tripod, which one person—Deanna—was operating.

In our *Shepherd's Voice* newsletter, which was distributed in early December, there were "behind the scenes" kinds of photos that showed what is usually off-camera. Through these photos, you got a glimpse of what the whole setting is like—the things you don't typically see. Maybe it was startling to you to see me preaching to an empty sanctuary.

In October we shifted from prerecording our worship services to livestreaming them. There is a worship leadership and tech team of about 10-12 people. Each person has a particular role as we work together to create a meaningful worship experience. As a preacher, there is some visual and visceral feedback provided by this crew, but the preaching interaction is still odd because people are also focused on the role they have in leading worship. It is more challenging to preach without a more sizeable in-person congregation to provide the feedback that enlivens a sermon and helps the preacher determine things like, "Am I on-target?" or "Are they following me?" Or you adapt a bit-- you might slow down or repeat an idea.

Here's what other preachers say about this experience of preaching during this COVID time: (From a post on the PCUSA Leaders Facebook page)

Jason Ko, posted Dec. 28, 2020: I was curious as to how preaching has been for you in almost ten months of preaching online, drive-in, or prerecorded.

- Weird
- Disconnected
- Exhausting. Even after almost thirty years of preaching I didn't realize how much I relied on the emotional interaction with people.
- I think my preaching has suffered without direct live feedback. The more personal touches and the humor are much harder to marshal effectively prerecorded.
- [I'm] preaching to my MacBook. My husband edits prerecorded hymns, the liturgist and me into one service and uploads it to YouTube. It feels like part of me has been amputated.

One of the things you hear me talking about now and then when trying to help us understand the Biblical text is the importance of *context*. Most often, I have used this term in talking about the context of the Biblical text, meaning the historical, political, social, cultural, and literary background to the setting described in the text itself.

But the task of the preacher is reflect on and relate to both the Biblical text and context **and also the context of our lives**. So, the preacher must be in touch with the perspective of the congregation and all the factors that shape and affect us. And that task or that aim of connecting to the congregation is another thing that is made more difficult by COVID-19 physical separation.

So, with limited interaction with others, primarily by phone, email and Zoom, the questions a preacher wonders about are “Am I on-target?” and “Am I hearing people accurately?” or “Am I connecting with them?”

To be even more specific with this question, when I was preparing the sermon for Christmas Eve, I asked myself if the tone of the sermon would be perceived as a downer. I asked myself if the tone wasn't a bit heavy--if people would balk, thinking, "It's Christmas! Can't it just be happy?"

If you didn't hear/view the Christmas Eve sermon and service, I used the phrase “It stinks,” as I had once before in Advent, to speak honestly about our circumstances not being as we would wish—primarily, that we have been living with COVID-19 pandemic health conditions and restrictions for around 9 months. We have seen COVID health numbers go from bad to worse. Along with those “numbers” or “statistics,” it's likely that each of us knows an increasing number of people who have been impacted directly and significantly by COVID. Those numbers are of course people, and we ourselves know more and more who have been diagnosed, hospitalized, and some who have died.

So, as preacher responsible for engaging with God's word and engaging with the concerns of this congregation and this real context or real world in which we live, I had to ask myself how I was going to do that on Christmas Eve—or any Sunday or any occasion.

So, as you saw if you viewed our worship service, I addressed the real “It's stinky” nature of our lives as well as the hope and good news of the gospel that God chose in Jesus to enter a “stinky” world as well and who fully identified with the brokenness or stinky-ness of human lives by becoming fully human in Jesus.

And to do that, I had to conclude that the "It's stinky" message fits both our time and the broken world which Jesus entered.

Today's Epiphany Text

So, all this reflection can be brought to bear on today's Epiphany text from Matthew chapter 2 and to today's preaching task.

I used this phrase, “It stinks” as a shorthand way of acknowledging that our circumstances are not as we would wish. And, as I reflected about the Christmas Eve sermon, there is some appeal in being bluntly honest about that. And there is also some disappointment about acknowledging the stinky-ness as well. There is both freedom in calling it like it is as well as frustration or disappointment in having to do so—in things not being as we would wish.

If honesty or being blunt leads us to say the world as we presently know it is “stinky” or dark, then that same honesty would lead us to say the same thing about the world which Jesus entered—it was stinky and dark and troubling as well. Here are the basics about the story and setting from Matthew chapter 2:

The primary characters are

- **Herod the Great**, the Roman-appointed ruler of the region;
- **the Magi or Wise Men**, who are Gentiles, outsiders in this cultural setting. They watched the skies and were thought of as astronomers or astrologers. They were known for interpreting dreams and telling fortunes.
- **Jesus**, of course, and Mary and Joseph with him. . . Please notice that three times in this passage, Jesus is called a **child** (vv. 2, 8, 9). I point it out so that we don't mistakenly assume that this story in Matthew occurs chronologically right after Jesus is born, as we might think when we hear the Matthew story right after the birth narratives in Luke.

Others in the story are the chief priests and scribes who get summoned by Herod.

The story or plot line:

- Herod is an easily threatened and manipulative despot who turns to violence when he feels threatened. "All Jerusalem" is frightened with him because they know his volatile nature and the harm he has caused.
- The wisemen / seekers are at first subject to Herod's manipulation because of their naivete, but then, once enlightened, resist that manipulation.
- In the portion of the passage just beyond the designated Lectionary text, the family of Jesus is on the run for their lives as Herod's paranoia and fear leads him to despicable acts of violence. Joseph, Mary and Jesus flee to Egypt, where they remain safely until Herod's death.
 - And then the slaughter of the innocents (which is also omitted by the lectionary, is a part of the full story.)

The Epiphany story from Matthew echoes what we have acknowledged in the Christmas Eve story/in the story of Jesus' birth:

- That we might wish for a simple, pleasant Christmas story which is more "storybook" than real-life—in which is all happy. But that's not the world which Jesus entered and it's not our present world, either.

So, that uncomfortable paradox that we mentioned before remains: there is some freedom in calling it like it is—that things are stinky—but there is also the longing for a tidy, happy story without the tension, conflict, and danger of this one.

A couple things to note:

- **The role of the Wise Men:** First, they are outsiders. In the Jewish world, these are Gentiles, outsiders. They acknowledge it themselves when they announce

their intention to Herod, saying, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They don’t identify Jesus as their king, and yet, they “have come to pay him homage” (v. 2). They have come to worship him and bring him gifts of great value.

- When they do find him, they “were overwhelmed with joy” (v. 10).
- They are persistent—they persevere. There is their expectation and the way they track the skies. There is their travel and their diligent searching.
 - They are not dissuaded, even with the odd and likely unsettling reception they received from Herod. They had to have known something was up when he summoned the chief priests and scribes and then later called for the wisemen to return and gave them specific instructions. But they continued to follow the star.
 - Later, they trusted their dreams and returned home by another way rather than returning to Herod.
- The other thing to note is **God’s direction in guiding people**. God is persistent, too. God’s plan was going to work itself out. As we’ve noted before, God often chooses unlikely people, even so-called outsiders like these Magi, to accomplish what God wishes to do.

Jesus is A Light Shining in a Dark World

God in Jesus comes in love and mercy. God’s consistent action is to side with the oppressed and save those who are in need. God works through the magi, God warns in dreams, God helps the family take flight, God provides shelter and sanctuary in Egypt. Very little of this is what the various characters in the story would have hoped for or planned, yet none of it is devoid of God’s presence. God is working in and through these circumstances.

- As Gospel-writer John describes it, “The light [in Jesus] shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5).

So, this story is not really an easy one to hear. This story—both in the text from Matthew and in our own time—acknowledges that there are still “stinky” parts or “stinky” things that we experience.

It isn’t an easy story to hear, but a truthful and necessary one. It acknowledges that the world is difficult. That many entrusted with power are not trustworthy. That many who are well-intentioned will fall prey to manipulation. That far, far too many children are threatened and sacrificed to violence. But also that God is still at work. God is at work for the sake of the vulnerable. God is at work for on behalf of those fleeing violence. God is at work for the sake of the world. God is at work not only in mysterious

or intangible ways, but also through us. God is at work in ordinary people to do God's work in the world.

We, too, can be persistent people as we take stands against leaders who manipulate through fear, as we partner with others to offer shelter and sanctuary, as we resist oppression and violence and manipulation.

God is at work in us creating us to be bearers or reflectors of the light that has come into the world, the light that the darkness neither understands nor has overcome. God is at work in Epiphany people, people of the light, who know that the joy and grace of Christmas is not a gift to be admired but one to be put to work for the sake of the world God loves so much.¹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Thanks to David Lose for his column "The Other Christmas Story" inspiring the final section.
<https://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-c-2018-the-other-christmas-story/>