

Matthew 2:1-18; Isaiah 60:1-6  
Epiphany Sunday

January 8, 2017  
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PAINFUL ILLUMINATION  
[written in oral form]

Good stories have intrigue, a crisis and climax, a hero, a nasty villain and an inspiring message, too. The Magi story in Matthew has all that, plus some exotic characters, too--the Magi. Magi is a Greek word for a Persian word that means "Wisemen." They were scholars, priests, astrologers, and of course, seekers.

*Persian priestly astrologers in a Jewish story,... fascinating.*

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We all know this story about the three wisemen. Maybe we know it too well. All those Christmas pageants and nativity scenes may have given us an embellished children's version? For example, the three wisemen: Matthew doesn't tell us how many there were. There could have been two or ten; we don't know.

To be sure, a story shouldn't be over scrutinized, or the message may get lost in the analysis. Still, it's important to be faithful to the account / to the details.

This is true for any story, including news reports.

We've been hearing, recently, about fake news.

Fake news is nothing new, but fabricated stories are more easily spread these days thanks to social media. Moreover, they're harder to filter and discredit because our internet world is customized to our reality, and since we tend to believe what we want to be true, we don't ask probing questions,..... and... Thanks to software algorithms that use our history and interests, our internet journey reinforces our perceived reality.

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There is a lot of fake news going around.

Not too long ago, someone shared with me in disgust that Obama was building a highway from Mexico straight to Canada.

*There were not so hidden prejudices in that assertion.*

I replied, are you kidding me? There's no reason to build a new highway because there are many such highways, and they are called interstate highways.

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Here's a true fact from indisputable research:

If you don't go to church every Sunday, you will die! ~~~

It's true.

Yet, the result is also true if you do go every Sunday.

*Facts can be manipulated.*

Speaking of manipulated information:

Out of curiosity, I went to Sarah Palin's Facebook page.

I was a bit shocked at what I read.

Her "news" posts were unbelievable, and from sources I've never heard of before. Of course, they were unbelievable to me. My reality is very different.

Nevertheless, people of all perspectives receive and spread fake news, because what reinforces our opinions grants us a sense of certainty and confidence.

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So, check sources. Fact check, and do the research,.....AND... accept uncertainty. Accept uncertainty. Leave room for questions and doubt.

Abiding, "peacefully" **with** the discomfort of uncertainty and doubt will be beneficial on life's journey.

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The Magi were on a journey, and I don't want to abuse a 2,000 year old story by over dissecting it, but two parts of it trouble me.

One: the Magi were likely from Persia, which is to the East of Bethlehem.

Matthew wrote that they followed a star that was in the East. "At its rising" is another way of saying "in the East."

Therefore, they must have been vacationing on the Mediterranean Sea during the holidays when in the darkness they saw the unusual star in the east.

*I'm merely speculating here.....*

Regardless, it is a delightful story that exposes nefarious Herod, while using him and his court to affirm Jesus as the Messiah.

The Magi's presence, also, authenticates Jesus as the Messiah **for all people**, not just the Jews.

It's a great story, and I want to highlight a few segments of it. ....*picking up the narrative from where I left off.*

The Magi cancelled their reservations at the Tel Aviv Holiday Inn, packed up their possessions, and out into the night they went, following the Star.

At every little town along the way, they likely would stop and ask questions.

Wise people are wise....because they ask a lot of questions!

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Realizing that the star was a celestial birth announcement from God about a "real" King's birth, they ventured to Jerusalem to seek the advice of the local experts.

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This was an unfortunate decision they made, and being "wisemen", they had to have heard about Herod's control over the city.

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Herod had cast the city under his fierce and wicked control. Everyone feared Herod. The place felt like darkness.

Hard was nasty!

He was called king of Judea by the Romans, and he kept power through intrigue and viciousness.

He had killed his wife, brother-in-law, several of his own sons and countless "friends". Herod was paranoid about losing power.

Everyone feared him, and that fear was often manifested in silence.

Herod was evil.

His spies told them that foreigners were in town asking about where to find the "Born King.".....which all knew meant--the true King.

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Matthew points out that the court's experts confirmed Bethlehem as the birth city, and so Herod secretly summons the Magi to tell them the location.

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Beware of secret, closed door meetings. They are meant to control the message and block out the light of awareness.

Justice and righteousness always thrive out in the open light.

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No doubt, the Magi felt the tension in Jerusalem and with Herod. I'm sure they were anxious to get on their way.

Before they left, Herod pulled them aside for more interrogation, and then told them to, "Go and find this child, and after you do, come back and tell me his exact location." Herod slyly added, "...so I can pay homage to him, too."

Herod was trying to sequester the news, and giving the Magi a "fake" message of his intent was part of his scheme.

It's too **bad** the Magi's visit to Jerusalem brought Herod into play, yet it's also **good** that we all get to see Herod's darkness --the evil in Herod. It was already there,.....and it was dangerous, yet beneficial to expose evil.

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So, onto Bethlehem the Magi went, except for a brief stop at the local 10,000 villages store to pick up a few gifts.

I suspect that they told the store clerk they were buying gifts for a king, instead of for a baby,..... Oh well,....I'm sure those items came in handy,....later on.

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As we know, when the Magi found the house where Jesus, Mary and Joseph were living, they were filled with joy and worshipped the true king.

They were in the presence of the light of the world / the Christ / God's gift to all humanity, which included Persians from Iraq.

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There are holy moments in life...when God's presence is keenly felt.

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After being warned in a dream to avoid Herod, the Magi went home another way. Their journey continued, albeit with "illumination."

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It's no surprise that the text reading ends at this point.

This is a nice place to end, and sing a joyous hymn of response, BUT to do so would mean concealing part of the story, and thus spinning a fake story....just so we feel good.

So, let us continue, and receive the whole narrative.

An angel came to Joseph and warned him to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus....to avoid the howling wind of evil that was coming.

Herod was furious because the Magi did not report back to him.  
Herod ordered that ALL THE CHILDREN OF BETHELEM, two years and under, to be SLAUGHTERED.

And, it was done,....and there was loud wailing and lamentation.

!!HOW can this be?

This wonderful story about the star, the Magi and Jesus ALSO includes the Massacre of the innocents!  
I don't like this part!

How can this be? Why would Matthew include this in his story?  
It would have been so nice to have left it out.

Moreover, we must ask with pointed finger,  
Were the other parents told to flee? Were they also warned?

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And,.....if NOT, why NOT?

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The Messiah was saved.....others were not,....according to Matthew's narrative.

What does this say about God.....about life.....about us?

There is no clear / simple answer.

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Isaiah 60, one of the texts for today, suggests that there exists both darkness and light. Both,.....at least until the end of time.

The Magi story is a delightful narrative featuring darkness and a light in the night. There is joy and sorrow in the story, and it presents the hopeful message about the Messiah Jesus, yet it is framed with carnage. Moreover, we are left with uncertainty / with questions.

It's a great story.....because it reflects life, real life.

We live with many questions. When reported faithfully, the Bible leaves us with even more questions than answers.

We are invited to live with uncertainty and paradox. This is reality.

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We are good people, but each one of us has a dark side, too.

We contribute to pollution, injustices and destruction...as we proclaim peace and justice.

We struggle to be gracious.....as we demand to receive grace.

We seek to follow the light of Christ.....as we empower the Herods of the world to action.  
Both.....all aspects exit. This is painful to admit, but it's true.

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If Christianity is to thrive....even survive,...we must learn to be more honest and authentic.  
Consider: the same journey in the night that brought illumination and the discovery of Jesus.....also  
brought death to the innocent.

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We'd rather have a vision that brings resolution and certainty, like a nice Disney fairy tale. That's good  
entertainment, but such fantasies are not real.

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What inspires and sustains us are those rare holy moments when we keenly feel that we are in the  
presence of God.

It is those precious moments that mark and lead us along God's holy way.  
This is our faith: through the light and the dark.  
It's real, very real!