

Star Light, Star Bright

January 2, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Matthew 2:1-12

Have you ever felt like you were a little bit turned upside-down?

You could take that question literally – I remember being a kid, hanging upside-down by my knees on the monkey bars, swinging back and forth and praying that I didn't fall off, until all the blood rushed to my head and turned my face red and I couldn't stand it anymore and I had to flip over and sit upright for awhile before I would be able to see straight and walk in a straight line.

Or you could take it figuratively, where everything feels so messy and out-of-whack and confusing that we just feel like we are upside-down, and nothing at all makes sense. As we enter into this new year, and look back over the last year...or the last two years...or the last decade, I am think that probably a lot of us feel like we have spent a whole lot of time hanging upside-down and we are just longing for that proverbial head rush to go away so that we can make sense of what is in front of us again.

If that is you, then the Epiphany story is for you. Our scripture reading today is all about the upside-down and the backwards. It's a story that we have heard, some of us many, many, *many* times – every year, around this time of year. The story of the wise men, or the magi, being led by a star to where Jesus has been born, and presenting him with gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. It is such a staple of our Christmas tradition that you would be hard-pressed to go out and find a nativity scene that doesn't have little wise men figurines as a part of it.

Which is kind-of funny, because the wise men were never there in the stable, with baby Jesus and the animals and the shepherds. We conflate the two stories as one, but they are actually two separate stories. Which is why we don't read the story of the wise men until a week or two after Christmas. Because some time has passed between that moment when Jesus was born, and the time that the wise men arrive on-scene.

So, we know this story well, because we hear it often. But to our modern ears, we usually don't hear just how ridiculous this story is. How scandalous. How topsy-turvy. But it is. Big-time.

Starting with King Herod.

King Herod is the bad guy of this story. The villain. We get that. But what we don't get is *just* how bad a guy he is.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a beautiful children's book about the wise men titled *Home by Another Way*, in which she describes Herod for little kids. Maybe not the most accurate depiction...but it definitely paints a picture.

Taylor writes,

He was lumpy and rumped, and he had terrible breath. His skin looked a funny orange color and sickly, as if his bile had gotten the best of him.

The guards on either side of him shook in fear of their king, so much that their spears rattled against their shields. Without even comparing notes, the wise men knew he was not the person they were looking for.

So, Herod may or may not have been lumpy and rumped with sickly orange skin, but the reality of who he was, was actually far worse. He had a reputation. He was infamous throughout the whole region, both for his brutality and his paranoia. He was absolutely convinced that *everybody* was out to get him, to steal his crown. And because he was a power-hungry sociopath (I mean, they didn't diagnose sociopaths back then, but I am certain that he fits the criteria) – he has zero scruples and no conscience – he will stop at *nothing* to keep his crown.

If that means killing a bunch of people, he won't blink twice before issuing the order.

If that means having toddlers mass-murdered, so be it.

If that means having his own family killed, again...he'll do whatever it takes. And he did. He had one of his wives, and several of his own sons murdered, because he was afraid that they were planning a coup.

Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor during that time, famously said that "it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son." And since Herod was a Jew and Jews did not eat pork, that was pretty accurate. The unclean pigs were safe, but his own flesh and blood – they'd better watch their backs.

Herod was un-hinged. He didn't like surprises. And the news of Jesus's birth was not good news for him. Because in his messed-up mind, it confirmed his worst nightmares. And it was not good news for the rest of Jerusalem, either. Because when Herod gets scared, people die. And Herod was scared. He had this flashing realization that there was something out there over which he had zero control. And every new parent throughout the kingdom was about to pay the price for that.

So, that's Herod. Let's talk about the Wise Men, or the Magi.

Matthew's gospel is really interesting, because it is written by a Jewish person, to a Jewish audience. But throughout the whole gospel, starting at the very beginning with the genealogy and weaving its way throughout the entire story of Jesus's life and death,

Matthew keeps ever-so-subtly writing outsiders – gentiles and unexpected people – into God’s story.

The wise men were not from around here. Tradition tells us they were probably from the land of Persia – which, if you will remember your Old Testament history, that was the empire that took over the ancient Babylonian empire when the Israelites were in exile, and the Persian king Cyrus was the one who issued the edict that the exiles could return home again.

So, these wise men aren’t just outsiders. They herald from a region that the Jewish community would rather forget about – would rather pretend didn’t exist. Because it reminds them of one of the darkest, most painful seasons in their history.

Not only that, but these wise men aren’t just people who follow a different religious tradition. They are magicians. Astrologers. Fortune tellers. People who, on a number of occasions throughout scripture, God had specifically told God’s people to be wary of. Especially Babylonian astrologers – fortune tellers who came from the very region that the magi came from. The Old Testament prophets did not have many good things to say about them.

And yet, here they came, following a star that only they could see.

Can you see how completely upside-down this is? The Jewish Messiah is born. But the Jewish king – the leader of the people – is so crazy, so power-hungry, so stuck on himself, that not only can he not see the good news that is right in front of him, but he hastily kills thousands of the most vulnerable of his own citizens to put a stop to it. But it is the wise men from the east – those who God has said to beware of – Israel’s former enemies – who notice the star in the sky and come to pay him their respect.

If that isn’t completely backwards, I don’t know what is.

But is that not also so true to life? How often do we fail to see that which is right in front of our noses? And how often are we surprised and deeply-blessed by the people we least expect?

And speaking of unexpected blessings, let’s talk about the wise men’s gifts. Because those, too, are a little bit upside-down and crazy. Gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold...well, that is not so crazy. It’s a sign of royalty, and it would have been a most welcome gift to Mary and Joseph, who were undoubtedly financially-strapped. This would give them enough money to live on, especially when they had to make an unexpected side trip to Egypt to get out of dodge when Herod sent his cronies after them.

Frankincense and myrrh, though...those were a little bit more unusual. Both of them were expensive tree resins, both of which were believed to have held certain healing properties. Frankincense was used ceremonially in sacrifices, and burned as incense in the temple, as an act of worship; if any of you have ever been to a worship service in a Catholic or Orthodox, or even some Episcopal traditions in which they burn incense, it is probably mostly Frankincense that you smell. It was native to that area and widely-available, but still costly. And it was often used as a medicine, to treat inflammation and certain forms of arthritis.

Myrrh, though – that's the gift that really leaves us scratching our heads. It's similar to Frankincense, but its symbolism is way off-the-charts-wonky for a baby's birth – at least, in the Jewish tradition it is. It is also seen to have healing properties, similar to that of Frankincense. It's antimicrobial, so it kills bacteria and fungi, and it's a pretty effective natural painkiller. And especially for the wise men, who come from a different culture and a different tradition, Myrrh was likely used in their culture by postpartum mothers to aid in the healing process after birth. A really thoughtful gift.

But that practical use did not translate well to Jewish tradition. Because in the Jewish culture, Myrrh was a burial spice. It was used to anoint dead bodies and to assist in mummification. Its strong smell was really effective in masking the stench of death. I have to wonder – after the wise men accidentally sent Herod on a killing spree, what Mary and Joseph thought when they opened that gift. It would be like you or I opening a gift at a baby shower, that turns out to be an urn. Beautiful, maybe...but not the time or the place.

Myrrh has a bitter taste. It's extracted by cutting into the trunk of the small commiphora tree. As the tree's wound heals, a resin seeps out and hardens into the shape of tear drops. As the resin is exposed to the light, it changes in color from yellowish white to scarlet, resembling drops of blood. It's absolutely ripe with symbolism.

When Jesus was crucified, myrrh was mixed with wine and given to Jesus – maybe as an act of mercy – a painkiller of sorts; or maybe to make the wine taste bitter and unappealing. And when Jesus died and was buried, myrrh was used to anoint his body. So while the wise men probably had no idea what they were doing – they just brought what they thought was an expensive gift basket of baby Tylenol – this gift ended up taking on a deep and powerful meaning.

A gift usually reserved for the dead, used to bless a newborn king who would ultimately redeem the world through his death.

So, here we have it. Kings-turned-villains, and enemies turned worshippers. Signs of death blessing new life. As the star began to shine in the night sky, God was becoming man. A teenager was giving birth to the son of God. Rulers were being brought low, and

the lowly were being exalted. *Everything* in the world was being turned upside-down, and nothing would ever be the same again.

My friends, the world has been upside-down for a long time. Or maybe, we as people have been the ones swinging upside-down in a world that is right-side up. Things feel topsy-turvy and sometimes it is hard to get our bearings when things in life that we had come to rely on, just don't seem to make a whole lot of sense anymore.

And when the world starts spinning, and things start to get out-of-control, we have a choice to make. We can start navel-gazing, like King Herod did, or we can start stargazing like the Wise Men. We can try to seize control of the situation, and in so doing totally miss the newness of life that God is unexpectedly birthing in our midst, or we can take up our weird and wonky gifts and set out on a journey, not knowing where the star is going to lead us but trusting that we will discover new life in the end – and trusting that God will take what we offer and use it to bring life to the world.

Because sometimes, it is in the upside-down that we discover the right-side up. Sometimes it is in the shaking up that we truly find our solid ground. So as we enter into this new year, may we set out on a journey, expecting the unexpected, and trusting that as we follow the star that guides us, we will come face-to-face with the king of the universe.