

Every year around this Sunday, it seems to me we go into a liturgical limbo. Maybe you've noticed: for some reason we have a few more empty seats than we had last Sunday, Christmas Eve night. And there's the calendar question: when does Christmas end? Our Christmas season garlands and decorations are still up, and technically the season extends, but Christmas is surely behind us. The gifts are opened, the beauty of singing "Silent Night" and lighting the sanctuary with our candles are well behind us. (This limbo affects different homes, also, to different degrees: how long do you keep your Christmas tree up, and the Christmas decorations? (One of you mentioned a neighbor who'd thrown out their tree, stripped and dumped unceremoniously in the gutter, by early afternoon, Christmas Day! No twelve days of Christmas for that family!)

A brief explanation about our Church calendar: historically, the Christmas season included 4 weeks of preparation (Advent), Christmas Day—the first of the Twelve Days of Christmas—and the culmination of the season, the "Epiphany," (January 6) and then, the following Sunday, the Baptism of Jesus (followed by a few weeks to get ready for Lent, the journey with Jesus to the cross and to Easter...) To this day: Orthodox/Eastern Christians place greater emphasis on Epiphany than Christmas; some Latin American countries still celebrate "Three Kings Day."

Is this splitting hairs, parsing the difference between Christmas and Epiphany? Christmas celebrates the "Incarnation" of God: God among us uniquely in Jesus the Christ; Epiphany celebrates the "Manifestation" or "Revealing" of God's unique presence in Jesus the Christ. (You'll note that "epiphany" with a small "e" still captures this sense: an "aha" moment or a "God" moment, like Moses before the burning bush, or that time when what you have been hearing for years and finally makes sense, or when the praying session that maybe started out feeling dutiful suddenly feels as if you have been touched by the Spirit directly...aha!)

What's the real difference between Christmas and Epiphany? We're probably safe if we think of it as a theological equivalent of a tree falling in the forest and nobody there to hear it: "What if God came to reconcile all the world to Himself thru the Son Jesus, and nobody noticed or got the message or invited anyone else to get the message?" (That's no good from God's standpoint, or ours—so we get Epiphany every year to celebrate that Jesus is revealed, noticed.)

When it comes to Epiphany, no one is more central to the story than the "three kings," the magi. (You may know by now: "three" were never mentioned; we know only that they were astrologers, the most learned men in their ancient land.) There are two main points, to Matthew. First, they are not Jews, not from the House of Israel: they're outsiders! They do not know the Scriptures, the prophecies; do not know all the Bible stories—yet they are the "good guys," the heroes in this account. And second, these magi represent the pinnacle of human knowledge: they were the rocket scientists, the nuclear physicists, the brain surgeons—they were the expert witnesses called to testify before congressional subcommittees of their day.

These wise men drop what they're doing, leave their families, leave their studies, maybe compromise their position at the royal court (do you also feel, as I often do, the tendency to belittle the faithfulness of others—"They lived a long time ago; how

important could their responsibilities have been—compared, say, to my life, my responsibilities...” It’s easy to discount the price they paid to go off to pursue the Child (and not in their SUV with his and hers climate controlled sections, nor automatic bum-warmer leather seats nor a GPS talking navigation systems—but they went by camel, weeks and weeks and weeks across the desert.)

What were they thinking? They were thinking this Child, “born King of the Jews,” was worth their coming a long way, at great personal cost, to worship! No need to be distracted by the details of that star: somehow, these non-Jews, these wisest men in the wider world, recognized that in the child Jesus there was born One, One in all the world, One worthy of their allegiance, their worship—symbolized by their costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We are meant to think of them as the “good guys” in the story: even from far away they are both humble enough and “heads up” enough to recognize God’s presence uniquely in the Christ on earth—and do something about it.

(I note that they did not “have a personal relationship with Jesus” yet (he was likely but a toddler) but they responded in faith to the light they did have. They were not held guilty for what they did not know but are celebrated, in our lesson, for what they did know, and what they did act upon.)

I believe this is a key principle throughout the Scriptures: people are encouraged in the light they do have—not condemned for the Light they do not have. Remember those ancient figures Melchizedek and Job. Melchizedek was highly esteemed by Abram and the Psalmist and other authors; Job was abundantly blessed by God—both are saved, redeemed, yet neither was a child of the covenant. They were not Jews. We discussed Paul’s conviction two Sundays ago as to the status of the Jews before God: “as regards election, they are beloved.” They are reconciled to God. And in the New Testament: remember the Ethiopian who was already reading the prophet Isaiah (in Acts 8)—Philip detours to tell him about Jesus. The Ethiopian asks to be baptized then and there! Remember Cornelius, praying diligently to God, obediently sending to Peter, who then visited Cornelius, telling him all about Jesus. Cornelius also was baptized on the spot! These men were eager to believe; Cornelius was praying to God. They simply hadn’t heard about Jesus yet.

Likewise the wise men ventured forward, following the light they had, seeking the Light they longed to meet. They were “overwhelmed with great joy” upon finding His home; they freely knelt down and worshiped Him!

The “magi” are held up to be the “good guys” at the expense of the religious officials and scholars—the ones who should have known that the Anointed One, the Christ, had been born—but who had been asleep to His importance. (No arduous long journey would have been necessary for them: these scribes and chief priests were right there in Jerusalem; they knew Micah 5:2-4, but the data of their knowledge made no real difference to them.)

Jesus was born under their noses—but His importance didn’t register. (Now I suppose they were busy with important responsibilities—but I confess they make me more than a little nervous: do you suppose they were answering emails and phone calls, studying the Scriptures each day, praying to God, out making a living, trying to build up

a following for their religion—but perhaps their disciplines had taken the place of the glory of God in the Child Jesus, the revelation of Him newly present to them?)

Why did the outsiders, the Magi, have eyes to see, while the religious remained blinded by their familiarity? Why is it still apt to be so?

Of course the real villain in the story is the other king, the one who thinks he's the only king, the one who is sure Judah is not big enough for any rival of any kind. (Herod the Great, this Herod, is the paranoid egomaniac who killed 3 of his own sons and one of his 10 wives, so intent was he on clinging to his pathetic crown at any cost.)

The magi are not fooled when Herod tells them to “bring [me] word, when you've located this King, so that I may also go worship Him.” (Like the wolf telling the woodsmen he wants to find Little Red Riding Hood so he can take her a nice fruit basket...) But the magi are way ahead of Herod—they get out of town before the posse, and Herod is left holding the fruit basket of his fear and self-importance and tyranny—so he orders the massacre of all the little boy-children whom he thinks might be this so-called King. (Herod is no match for even the toddler Jesus, who was already safely in Egypt following God's warning to Joseph ahead of time)

Having covered something of what's going on in our lesson, I want to explore with you two questions from the perspective of our Advent series—with which you are free to disagree, as most of the Church has, and does...

In very brief review: I believe the Scriptures are best understood, given the life, teaching, and death and Resurrection of Jesus, to teach that God loves every person, and God will eventually reconcile every person to Himself, thru the Savior of the world Jesus—the true King of Judah and all of creation. “The Good News is for all the peoples;” the Christ is worthy of worship from every professor, every rocket scientist, every simple shepherd. Jesus the Son has revealed God to us; God is the same yesterday, today, forever. The moment we die God does not turn into an ogre who says, “Gotcha! Just kidding about Jesus and the love business—it's into the flames of hell with you!”

Our lesson brings a tragic but timely test case to the all-reconciling love of God, along with a certain irony, given that Saddam Hussein was executed earlier this week for having been convicted of the massacre of civilians. Could it be fair, or conceivable, that Herod, or Saddam Hussein, could wind up in heaven? Is the love God stronger and more enduring than the evil of a person? Can Herod act evil enough to cause the love of God to morph into anything less?

Some people seem jump to the conclusion that the moment a King Herod dies then suddenly he will be choose to do an instant 180 and reject everything he loved on earth and embrace everything he hated on earth. I don't think so! Saddam Hussein had every chance here on earth to turn to the Light, to allow his heart to be moved by the love of God. He chose not to, as far as we know.

Why would we think that suddenly, now that he's face to face with the same Love of God for whom he had such contempt on earth, he says to himself, “Oh, I think I must have been mistaken—I love you after all, Jesus”? (Maybe he will; maybe he already did—not my business. My interest in this sermon series is not to presume to play God—but to proclaim what I believe Jesus proclaims: “He has come into the world that the world might be saved—He has not come to condemn the world.” [John 3:16-17])

Gregory of Nyssa (5<sup>th</sup> Century) observed that for many “the road to heaven leads thru hell.” No doubt that refining, readjusting, repenting, accepting divine reconciliation will take plenty of time for some folks. When a militant unbeliever who lived his life hating and killing, only mocking the love of God, comes face to face with Jesus the Judge of us all, I assume there will be only more for the unbeliever to hate more rabidly. The love of Jesus will still appear to the tyrant as weakness; the grace of God as hateful, the Light of His glory as blinding to the self-centered eye.

The obstacle into heaven is not the love of God, but the attitude of each of us sinners: what do we do with the Christ, with the love of God, with the Light we have been given—Christian, or Jewish, or neither? If folks can’t stand love or mercy or reconciliation here, don’t worry that they’re going to wake up tomorrow when they’re dead and suddenly love what they hate. (Has repentance been so easy or casual for you or me? And we’re worried it will be too easy for Herod or Saddam Hussein? On earth as it is in heaven: if a person is happy going his/her own way, Jesus is but an obstacle, a royal pain.)

In our death, we will each have to do with Jesus, like it or not—but His loving presence—heaven—will be experienced as hell to any who hates love, hates mercy, hates forgiveness, hates freedom, hates God-ordained individuality. And has human history shown it’s so easy to stop hating? [For a time, many scholars did not believe Herod actually commissioned the massacre of the Judean baby boys. Perhaps the tens of millions murdered by Stalin, and Pol Pot, and Hitler, and Mao, and Saddam Hussein in the Twentieth Century alone have, unfortunately, removed some of that scholarly skepticism.]

People misunderstand heaven who consider it an external reward, like a bribe: “be good, go to church, say you love Jesus, win a “get out of jail free” card.” If this were so, it might be possible for eager, horrendous sinners (who are, after all, pretty good at identifying their own short-term self-interest) to simply meet Jesus when they die, change their spots, and say “I repent; I’ll take the cash and the eternal goodies.” But heaven is not like this: by His grace, being in the presence of God in heaven is intrinsic reward to a heart and life freely yielded to Him and His way—whether we had yet been introduced to Him or not. (Like wanting to marry the sweetheart you love and respect is intrinsic to your passion—its fulfillment. If someone forced you to live with someone you hated, marriage would be no bargain—in fact, it would feel hellish. (This and other insights gleaned from *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*, by Clark Pinnock)

[Being in heaven for Saddam Hussein would mean eating at the same table with the Kurds whom he tried to annihilate; for Hitler it would mean rubbing shoulders with the Jews he so hated. That will not feel instantly enjoyable. I believe it will take plenty of time, plenty of refinement, for them to come around to changing their mind.]

It all makes me wonder about those prejudices, those habits, those fears, those addictions which I may love more than I love obeying Jesus in every particular. Is there any habit, any hatred, any unresolved old relationship within my power to begin to reconcile—is any of it worth hanging onto if it means keeping me more distant from Jesus, from abiding fully in communion with Him, from living “in heaven”—in this realm and the next? “To know God, and the One whom He has sent, is eternal life” [John 17:3] What could possibly be worth it to me?

God's eternal love, God's invitation to every creature does not weaken or waver. Here's one more way to sum it up: "Hell is not the prison from which people are longing to be freed, but the sit-in where sinners have barricaded themselves in to keep God out." [Gustav Aulen, *the Faith of the Christian Church*]

That leaves one further issue to press this morning, especially during Epiphany. Much of the Church has believed great multitudes of unbelievers were going to burn in the flames of hell—and obedience to Christ coupled with this compassion for unredeemed sinners has fueled a great deal of the mission and evangelism of the Church for much of its history.

If we believe Jesus came to show us that God has always been a God of love rather than of terror, and even that God will win over everyone, in the fullness of eternity—then are we to save ourselves the trouble, keep the good news of the gospel to ourselves?

Of course not: our motivation is what Jesus taught us. We proclaim the goodness of God, the reality of the Kingdom of God—not the awful cruelty of God. We never assume God's grace was missing before, and that when people learn of Jesus it becomes present—fortunately, the love of God is not limited to our faithfulness in spreading the word!

Jesus loved the crowds, and felt compassion for them as sheep, helpless and hassled, having no shepherd. [Mt 9:36] For so many people, rich and poor: life is hard. Without a Shepherd to trust, life is confusing and disappointing and often lonely and frightening. Jesus loves the sheep, loves each person. This is His motivation, and ours, as He sends His church (each of us, just as we are) out to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God which dawned in His life on earth. [Mt 9:35] Saving people from the flames of hell is very different from inviting them to live in the Kingdom, to become a valued and enthusiastic member of Christ's family. "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."

Jesus relies on us, His Church to live in colonies of heaven here and now—to model genuine community right here in Corona del Mar. His Church—you and me—is His best hope for transforming this world—this world of Herods and magi and genocide and mothers making every sacrifice for their babies and fathers protecting their families in every land and every religion. We gather together to encourage one another; we worship, we strive to help strengthen the Marshallese congregation, and the orphanage and the day care center in Baja for His sake.

You and I, His Church, even today, are His best hope for helping every one of His creatures have the choice to know the Light to which they mostly already want to be attuned. The Holy Spirit of God is present in every land, in every heart, in every religion, in people of no religion—in the Persians, in the magi, in the outsiders, in the unlikeliest candidates—so His Church, in being obedient to His commands, and introducing people to Jesus allows His creatures to come to know and love the Source of the light they have been awaiting.

What an opportunity offered each one of us, His followers: to bring the reassuring news that God knows and loves each of our neighbors, each person. God is for them, not against them; God loves them, not hates them.

The magi were wise enough to come worship the King, even when He was a child. How much more we have opportunity to worship the risen King of heaven and earth, and to enjoy Him forever, and to obey Him in faithful service which has become its own reward—service which brings glory and Honor to His name, now and forever. Amen

### **Matthew 2:1-18**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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 worship him."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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 worship him."

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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."

Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt... When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

