

A Homily preached by
The Rev'd Jo Popham

“God raised up a star to announce the birth of the Messiah”
Epiphany C 2013, January 6, 2013
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Matthew 2:1-12

If we were to make an announcement that had global implications today, how might we do that? Twitter? Facebook? Text everyone in our contacts on our phone? CBC News? The Globe & Mail? But what if we lived in a remote area of the world without a link to iCloud – without cable – without satellite service – without newspaper delivery? Because such was the world more than 2000 years ago.

And what would get everyone's attention – everyone's interest? Say we wanted to tell the world about the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ – would that have global impact sufficient to capture our attention? What about the ancients in the 1st century? What would be so important that the pronouncement would “make a splash” so to speak? What devices might the author of Matthew use to catch and hold onto his readers? Biblical literature? Traditions of the time? Treasured symbols? Matthew used all of these devices to get and keep our attention – and very effectively. It is as though Matthew allowed his readers – including us – to overhear history through the lens of Scripture, faith, and tradition.

Matthew said that “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...” (Matthew 1:18). But in Matthew's story there is no stable – no shepherds to spread the news. In Luke there are no Magi, no gold, no frankincense, and no myrrh. However, we must resist the temptation to try to square Luke's story with Matthew's. The two distinctive birth stories have their own perspective, and we need to appreciate each for its own witness to the meaning of God's action in the birth of the Messiah. We know that eye-witness testimony is not reliable evidence. Any two people who witness an accident will report very different facts. (Ancients knew this because there needed to be two witnesses to any document for it to be legally binding.) Necessarily the two versions would have been reported differently. And the two nativity stories were written for two

different communities – two very distinctive communities – Matthew writing for a Jewish audience and Luke to primarily Gentiles. Matthew also was written from the perspective of a post-resurrection Christian worldview – a very early Christian worldview. The church of Matthew’s time was primarily Jewish, but they were also alienated from the synagogue that was once their home. So there was tension between the Christian Jews and Jews who did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. And there was tension between Matthew’s church and the Gentile believers. So the story unfolded in this complex context. And so the good news of the birth of Jesus, the Christ, was heralded by the Bethlehem star. Now was Matthew simply using a symbolic literary device? It was the custom rooted in the Greco-Roman belief that the birth of great figures would be signaled by unusual celestial occurrences. Some Jews recalled the prophecy of Balaam where the promised Messiah is referenced: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near – a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.”ⁱ And ... scientists and astronomers in recent times have discovered a cluster of planets or stars around the time of Jesus's birth - pointing to a dramatic heavenly event that might “prove” Matthew’s account more historically true than not.ⁱⁱ

But scientifically or historically correct or not, the news recorded by Matthew is that a king was born. But there already was a king. And there was no room for another kings. So the idea of kingship was set in this conflict. And, I dare say, it still is. And this is why we read and study Matthew’s birth narrative. Again I caution us not to try to conflate the two beautiful and distinctive versions of the birth narrative. I also would caution us not to try to prove either or both stories by history without looking to the reasoning behind the composition of the stories.ⁱⁱⁱ The Gospels are much more than simple historical accounts because they incorporate layers and layers of symbolism, theological reflection of particular communities of faith, and Scriptural interpretation. Yes, we should read different stories in light of Old Testament prophecies.

So let us look at the story through the eyes of 1st century Jewish Christians. Matthew gives us details of Jesus’s birth through the visit of the wise men. The story is set in the time of King Herod. – the puppet king of Judea who served at the pleasure of Rome.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, only five miles south of the Temple in Jerusalem, Bethlehem being the hometown of David, where he was anointed king.^{iv} The wise men, the magi who were astrologers came to Jerusalem from the east to find the child who was born to be the king of the Jews. Later tradition elevated the wise men to kings based on Old Testament Scripture.^v The wise men were of a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian who were experts in reading the stars and interpreting dreams. So these kings came to Herod the puppet king to seek the baby Jesus who was the royal heir of King David and who would become the king of the Jews.

Herod did not have the ability to read – to contextualize – Scripture, so he called in his allies – the priests and the scribes – who were experts in the Law, and in Scripture.^{vi} The prophet Micah did not mention the Messiah, but rather the prophecy anticipated God’s reign, a reign that would end imperial ambitions and bring non-Jews into God’s worship. From out of Judah would come a ruler that might usurp Herod’s rule. The Jewish leaders did not really know how to relate the Old Testament prophecies to the coming of the Messiah, nor did they contemplate how to put their knowledge into action by traveling to Bethlehem. Neither could Herod read the signs of the time, so he sent the Magi to essentially spy – under the guise that he wanted to go himself to worship this shepherd, this ruler.

The good news of the birth of Jesus, the Christ, was heralded by the Bethlehem star that guided strangers – people from distant lands – to the manger – to a babe in a manger. Yes, there was an expectation of the Messiah’s coming, but there was no one standard of expectation. Matthew stressed the Messiah’s connection to the lineage of King David.^{vii} Some Jewish leaders were expecting a prominent leader to arise from within the ranks of their people – from among the chief priests or scribes themselves – surely not from a baby, a child with no status in their society. While they were beholden to Herod they also resented him, feared him, even hated him. Herod was capable of massacring those who opposed or even questioned his power. Historians portrayed Herod as extremely paranoid and violent, quick to lash out. Yes, he was a great builder with great dreams.^{viii} But he spent much of his reign looking over his shoulder fearful of being overthrown. Indeed his

bloody reaction to the birth of Jesus is documented by ancient sources and is still commemorated by Jews every year.

My friends, God has raised up a star, so that everyone – everyone – today and yesterday – can find the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Matthew’s scripture invites us to seek and find the Savior of the world.

May we seek and find the Messiah. And may we help raise the star for all people to see and seek and find him.

Lord, May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ See Numbers 24:17.

ⁱⁱ The SMSU Planetarium (Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, MN) has for the last 35 years been telling the story of the Christmas Star in a 25 minute presentation entitled Star of Bethlehem in an effort to discover what this event might have been and how it could have guided wise men to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. They recreate the night sky at the date and time of Christ’s birth. Could the Christmas Star have been a planet (a “wandering star” or a meteor (a “shooting star”) or a comet (a “hairy star”) that would have appeared with a tail that looked like a beard? These are all candidates in SMSU’s search.

ⁱⁱⁱ We really do not need to prove the historical accuracy of the story of the wise men any more than we should try to merge the two birth narratives.

^{iv} See 1 Samuel 16.

^v See Psalm 72:10-11 and Isaiah 60:3.

^{vi} See Micah 5:2.

^{vii} See 2 Samuel 7:14.

^{viii} In his 33 year reign, Herod beautified Palestine, erecting palaces, fortresses (*i.e.*, Masada), temples, aqueducts, cities, and the great new Temple in Jerusalem – his crowning glory. He created the port of Caesarea in honour of Augustus which stimulated trade and commerce. He sponsored Olympic games of 12 B.C. He did all this and more with little support from his own kingdom. Herod was a half-Jew, but he seemed too Roman for his subjects, whom he taxed very heavily to fund his many projects. Even his family knew him to be a tyrant. He had 10 wives, but killed his favorite wife, her grandfather, her mother, brother-in-law, three of his sons, as well as many of his subjects. In his old age, plagued with arteriosclerosis, he worried that no one would mourn his death. So from his deathbed he ordered leaders from throughout Judea were locked in the great hippodrome at Jericho. When he died, his archers were to massacre these thousands so that there would be great mourning associated with his death (See www.billpetro.com).