

January 4, 2025 - Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany is in two days. On Tuesday. But since we don't meet on Tuesday, we'll observe it today.

Traditionally, Epiphany recalls the arrival of the Magi from the East bearing gifts of Frankincense, Gold, and Myrr.

So hopefully you still have your nativity scenes still out. And technically you shouldn't have the three wisemen, or Magi out yet. They don't arrive until Tuesday.

But Epiphany isn't about nativity scenes or a sentimental story about the miraculous appearance of a star.

Epiphanies are the sudden arrival of insight, a moment of grasping the truth or meaning.

Perhaps we can contrast epiphanies with apocalypses.

If apocalypses are like shouts that interrupt and disrupt, that rupture the ordinary; perhaps epiphanies are more like whispers. Not a total upheaval of the ordinary, but a revelation that the ordinary contains the sacred, that the divine word stirs within an otherwise ordinary event.

And Mathew provides an extraordinary story of an epiphany. In which the ordinary birth of a child to an ordinary couple, in an ordinary village, reveals the truth about power, about the world, about God. Mathew writes a subversive story, it's a whisper, like rumors being passed around the street that things are changing.

Imagine with me for a moment.

Imagine three emissaries, or diplomats, or foreign dignitaries representing, let's say, from China -- America's foremost rival -- arrive at the White House in Washington, D.C. and knock on the door. When the door opens, they ask, "Where is the new President?" And announce, "We have come to pay him homage."

It's not hard to imagine that this would make the current occupant of the White House very paranoid. So he calls together his cabinet and closest advisors for a meeting in the situation room. The current president demands to know who this new president is and where they are.

After combing through social media posts and pouring over maps, his advisors get back to him. They inform the president that there are rumblings about a person just across the border in Maryland, from a small humble town that many people believe is the legitimate president.

So armed with this information, the president calls the three foreign dignitaries into the oval office and says, "here is where you will most likely find the new president. And when you find them, let me know so I can invite them to the White House. I, too, want to pay them homage and help with a smooth transition of power."

Of course, what the president truly intends, is to have the so-called new president located, arrested, charged with treason, convicted and sentenced to death to ensure no one defies or challenges his power.

This imagining might seem a little silly. But maybe it can also help us realize the significance of this story in Matthew about the three Magi visiting from the east.

It's a politically subversive story. It's subtle, but a clear signal with all eyes to see and ears to hear, that the birth of Jesus represents a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Roman Empire. As I said earlier, it's akin to a whisper. Matthew's story appears in a time when stories like this could be counted as sedition. Could be interpreted as a call for rebellion against the Roman Empire. And writers of such stories could be put to death.

So Matthew doesn't shout that a regime-change is coming, he whispers it. He uses symbols to tell a story so that all with eyes to see and ears to hear will know that God is at work, that Rome's power is false power.

Let's take a moment to unpack all that's at stake.

First, let's consider Herod, who rules over Judea with the title "King of the Jews." Unlike our little imagining above, Herod isn't a democratically elected ruler. And his title King of the Jews isn't bestowed upon him by the Jewish population of Judea, nor has he simply inherited his reign through royal bloodline.

It's officially granted to him by the Roman Senate. Herod rules on behalf of the Romans, not the Jews of Judea.

When the Magi arrive inquiring about a newborn king, their arrival poses a direct question of legitimacy: *Who's the true leader of Judea?*

This is some real drama, some palace intrigue. These foreigners from the East, which many first century Romans would have understood as coming from Persia, Rome's foremost rival. Their arrival indicates a diplomatic mission or perhaps to announce some threat.

Herod is surely startled by the arrival of these foreign dignitaries from a rival empire, recognizing an alternative king.

Is there a popular uprising in the works? Is a rival king rising to contest Herod's power. Rome doesn't deal with either of these. They quash rebellions and uprisings. Violently and ruthlessly. There can't be instability or any questions of legitimacy.

The text says King Herod is frightened and all of Jerusalem with him -- the region might be on the cusp of a violent struggle. Moreover, Herod must answer to his Roman overseers. His legitimacy is at stake not only from below -- the population he rules over-- but also from above -- the Romans can easily replace him if his grasp of power seems tenuous and his rule seems insecure.

So Herod calls together the Chief priests and scribes. To us, chief priests and scribes sound like religious leaders. But chief priests are also appointed by Rome and they are better thought of as social and political leaders, perhaps something akin to the President's cabinet or closest advisors, they make up the ruling class.

After consulting the scriptures, and reading the signs of the times, and maybe having their ear to the ground about certain rumors arising from the streets, they tell Herod that the place to look is not in Jerusalem, the natural center of power, but a few miles away in the modest town of Bethlehem.

So Herod calls back the Magi and tells them this new information under the guise that he too, would like to pay homage to this new king. In reality, he sends the Magi on an intelligence mission, as spies, to return and give him the precise location of this new king so he can send in his special operations forces and put a quick and definitive end to this challenge to his rule.

Here is Herod acting as a Roman client kings act. Using deception to quickly eliminate his rivals.

And so the Magi depart, once again following the star. The star, here, too is a subversive sign that plays into the Roman's insecurity about power. There was a widespread belief among Romans that stars announced the rise and fall of emperors. The appearance of a star could be interpreted as a changing of the guard, a sign that legitimates the arrival of a new king.

All of this is a subtle nod to the readers of Matthew that Roman power and rule is unstable and reactionary. Herod is moved to act not by the arrival of a foreign army, or masses of protesters outside his palace calling for regime change. He is moved by fear of a newborn baby.

And suddenly the true meaning and significance of this story begins to take shape.

For the Magi are on the move to Bethlehem, nine miles further south of Jerusalem, a modest village down a dusty road. It has none of the pretensions of Jerusalem, no hopes of being a world capitol, it is not a center of commerce, a destination for the wise and learned of the world, nor a home for the rich and powerful.

Yet these wise magi, seemingly without hesitation, recalibrate their expectations and their maps, and head south towards the home of a newborn with no royal credentials whatsoever, no hopes of ever residing in Herod's palace. And when the star reappeared before them over Bethlehem, they stopped overjoyed and paid homage to the newborn babe, offering their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Perhaps these were the gifts intended for Jerusalem. Gifts intended to garner favor with a new king, gifts to gain entry to an emerging economy, gifts to set up trade relations with powerful business partners.

But now they are sacramental offerings, gestures toward the holy, an attempt to say what is unsayable, to honor the impossible.

These are gifts of a transfigured economy, in which there is no cost for entry, no valuation of goods and service, supply and demand, no scarcity. There is only excess, abundance, there is nothing to offer, to sell or trade, there is just existence, there is just life. Life that is fully illuminated, fully appearing, an economy that trades on the constant and continuous, and simultaneous exchange of love.

Here is the epiphany, the regime change that Matthew is whispering, a whisper that spreads across the streets of Jerusalem, across the sea and land of Asia minor and the oceans and to the four corners of earth: A new kingdom has come. God has arrived in the flesh of a newborn and no power on Earth will stop the coming kingdom; no violence can thwart its arrival, no nation-state or empire can draw its boundaries, no economy can produce its wealth, no army can match its power.

For this kingdom is without end; not yet here and always arriving. Made present to us in the very ordinary of life through offering and receiving of love. This is an epiphany, the whispers of the coming kingdom made audible in the candle lit for a sick friend, the prayer before a meal, in the warmth of a mid-winters fire, in the welcome of a stranger, in the hospitality offered to an immigrant, in solidarity with the oppressed, in the tending to land, in the refusal to live in fear...

In the bread and wine of communion. Where we, like Magi, become guests, sojourners and travellers, longing for light and illumination welcoming Christ into this world.