

Off By Nine Miles

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-11

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Why was “all Jerusalem” frightened when those wise men showed up?

Matthew’s story says that when wise men from the east came to Jerusalem and asked where they could find “the child who was born king of the Jews,” that King Herod “was frightened; and all Jerusalem with him” (Matt. 2:2-3).

I get why King Herod was frightened. His title was “King of the Jews.” The announcement, from foreigners no less, that some other child had been born who was rightfully King of the Jews threatened his place on the throne. Of course, King Herod was frightened.

But why “all Jerusalem” with him?

Because troubles for Herod meant troubles for his people.

Herod was known for both his paranoia (he believed everyone was out to get him and his throne) and for his penchant for violence (he would kill anyone he even suspected of conspiring against him).

For instance, he murdered his wife, Mariamne, her brother, her father, and her mother – all on suspicion of conspiracy. Over the course of his reign, he had two of his sons strangled on suspicion of conspiracy, and a third son killed later. His terror was so well known that Caesar Augustus once said of him, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son” (Dale Bruner, *Matthew: The Christbook*, vol. 1, 65). And at the time of Jesus’ birth, Herod had killed more than three hundred public servants on other suspicions of conspiracy.

So when Jesus was born and those Magi showed up from the East, it happened in an atmosphere of absolute repression and utter terror.

You see, troubles of Herod meant troubles of his people. So when these outsiders showed up with news of the birth of a new king whose very existence would threaten Herod’s claim to the throne, they were terrified.

How would he react? What new terror would he impose upon them? Who would he kill this time? Or, maybe more accurately, who wouldn’t he kill? All of Jerusalem lived under a cloud of fear.

“For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the people,” said the prophet Isaiah centuries before Herod was king (Is. 60:2). He wasn’t writing about Herod, but his words would have resonated with the people of Jerusalem. They knew all too well about “thick darkness.”

A few weeks ago when we had that terrible wind storm and those 100+ mph winds blew over so many trees, a large spruce two houses down from us was one of its victims. The tree fell toward the alley, hit a transformer, and killed power to our block instantly.

For four days we were without power. We had no heat, no lights, no stove.

The first day felt sort of like an adventure. As night fell, we found our headlamps and walked around our house, foraging for supplies in the dark. We pulled out a camp stove to boil water for coffee and tea. We set up sleeping pads and sleeping bags on the floor in the basement. We pulled out every candle we owned, and learned the hard way that our entire collection of candles are all scented. Pumpkin spice and lavender are difficult smells to reconcile, but when you need light you light both of them anyway.

The next morning, we awoke a still dark house. And it was cold. That night, outside temps had dropped to about 10 degrees, so the internal temp of our house was about 40 degrees. It was starting to feel less like an adventure and more like an inconvenience. There's nothing quite like having to take a shower when the air temp is just above freezing, never mind having to do it in the dark. That night, we found ourselves avoiding going home. It was dark and cold and miserable, and we were starting to feel exhausted from it all, so we got in my truck and drove around aimlessly for two hours just so we could have heat and look enviously upon neighborhoods that had power and light.

By the afternoon of the third day, the mental and emotional fatigue of being without light and warmth had taken its toll on both of us. We were walking around like zombies. I could not fathom even one more night in the dark and the cold. I was starting to feel at my wit's end.

Three days was all it took, I am ashamed to say. Three days, and I was at my wit's end. That is when it occurred to me how powerful a hold the darkness can have over a person. How much more, then, for the people of Israel who had to endure Herod's forty-year reign?

There is perhaps no more powerful metaphor in all of scripture than that of darkness and light.

In the beginning before God got involved, it was all darkness, and God's first words were, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:1-3).

In the Exodus, the LORD led the people of Israel out of Egypt as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night, "to give them light" (Ex. 13:21).

Psalms 27 says, "The LORD is my light and salvation," and the twenty-third Psalm assures us that "even though we walk through the valley of deep darkness" God is with us.

Proverbs speaks symbolically about wisdom as light for the eyes. It's no wonder we call it being "enlightened."

Paul speaks of believers as being light in the darkness (Rom. 2:19). John calls Jesus the light of the world (1:9). Jesus, himself, says, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others..." (5:14-16).

It's not that the dark is inherently bad... but *darkness* often has symbolic weight in scripture. And if in our story this morning, Herod is a harbinger of darkness, then the wise men serve as beacons of hope.

Brett Younger tells this story:

"Our family took a walk this week to get a closer look at the nativity scene three blocks from our house. Mary is, as usual, dressed in blue. Jesus, who looks about two years old, is wearing pajamas — not the normal translation for "swaddling clothes." Joseph and the sole shepherd could be twins. Apparently this shepherd isn't good at this job; there's only one sheep.

An angel playing a harp leans against the flagpole. Santa Clause is shimmying down a rope while four reindeer wait on the roof. Over to the side, three turbaned wise men stand in a line. The magi are bringing, according to my children, a jewel box, a golden football, and a silver sausage. The visitors from the east look at least as out of place as Santa" ("Forward in Faith," *Ministry Matters*, Dec. 1, 2019).

They would have looked just as out of place in Herod's court.

We don't know much about these visitors from the east. Most of what we know is more legend than fact, more myth than history. They are mysterious figures. We have come to call them magi, or wise men, or kings but it's unclear who they are or who, if anyone, they represent.

Most likely they are something akin to astrologers from the area of modern-day Iraq or Saudi Arabia, but even that is not certain. And, nowhere in scripture does it say there were three of them. Tradition has said "three," because of the three gifts they presented to the child... and the assumption that nobody would want to be the fourth guy who showed up empty-handed.

So they're surrounded in mystery — and that's part of the point. Who were these strangers who had a better bead on the birth of the Messiah than the Jewish people, themselves? Than Herod?

Their understanding wasn't perfect, though. They sat out on their journey because of the appearance of a star... "a light that shined in the darkness" (John 1:5). As mysterious as they are, that light is even more mysterious.

Did you ever notice that in this story, the star isn't constant. It appears and disappears. It shows up and sets the wise men on their way, but then turns off and they're left grasping in the dark.

That's how they came to Jerusalem. The light had pointed them in the general direction, but by the time they got to where they thought it had been — it was gone. So they end up in Herod's court in the capitol city of Jerusalem. That's the logical place to look for new born kings — in the capitol city. Not out in Calhan. They show up and say, "Where is he? A light brought us here."

But they were in the wrong place. The three kings probably had a passage like Isaiah 60 in mind:

"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you... Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around... they come to you... from far away..." (60:1, 4).

It goes on to talk about how all of the world will stream to Jerusalem to learn the ways of God, how God's glory will light up the city like a black of light, and how the world will carry with them treasures, like gold and frankincense.

And here they were — strange magi from far away with gold and frankincense in hand, talking a new king, setting off all Herod's suspicions.

In his panic, Herod arranged a consult with the leading Old Testament scholars of the day, and said, "Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is this about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?"

They say, "You have the wrong text. Those wise men have the wrong text."

"Well, do you have a better one?"

Probably trembling with fear at correcting this maniacal king, they point to Micah 5:2: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from old..."

Bethlehem. Bethlehem wasn't where you'd expect to find a king. It held no seat of power. Bethlehem was nine miles south of Jerusalem. They wise men had missed their mark by nine miles. But as the wise left Jerusalem, the strangest thing happened: the star flickered back to life and guided them the rest of the way there. And the rest is history.

I think we have a lot to learn from those wise men. Sometimes, we are off by nine miles, too. We think we know what God wants, think we know what it means to be Christian, think we've arrived in just the right place... when actually we are off by nine miles, too.

That's we call it a spiritual journey, an not merely a spiritual destination.

At the end of the day, the Christian faith is not a set of beliefs, but a willingness to travel, to pursue God's gentle light. Christianity is not a place to stand, but a direction in which to move. And God is constantly inviting us to follow the light.

Tom Long tells this story:

"I know of a congregation that , for many years, provided a 'living nativity pageant' in its community. The church is in the center of town and has an expansive front lawn. On a certain December Sunday afternoon each year, it would fill that lawn with live sheep and goats and donkeys, costumed shepherds and wise men, a gaggle of angels, an innkeeper, manger, and, of course, the holy family. Ample crowds would gather each year to see the Christmas story acted out live and in person.

One year, the men who were playing the role of the Magi borrowed a thurible, an incense-burning censer, from the Catholic parish in town. The idea was that as they trekked across the lawn toward the manger, these mysterious Magi from the East would surround themselves with a fog of incense to add to the exotic quality of their appearing.

So the wise men gathered in the fellowship hall, waiting for their cue. Just before the moment arrived, they lit the incense and got it during properly. Unbeknownst to them, though, they managed to trigger the church's fire alarm, which sent an automatic signal to the local fire department.

As they walked toward the manger, each bearing a gift for the newborn Jesus, they were astonished to see yellow-slickered firemen unrolling fire hoses across the church lawn and mingling in a scene of confusion with the shepherds, angels, and goats. Ultimately, the fire chief spotted the burning incense pot, put two and two together, and announced in a loud voice heard by all, 'You %#@& wise men are setting off alarms all over town!'

And, somewhere in the Great Beyond, the original magi smiled in approval, remembering that they, too, had set off alarms all over town ("Setting off alarms," *Christian Century*, Dec. 28, 2014).

The wise followed that light even when it seemed foolish, even when they ended up in the wrong place and had to correct course. They wanted to see Jesus more than they wanted to keep their treasures, more than they wanted to play it safe, and more than they feared the difficulties of the journey.

I don't know about you, but I find myself thankful for those wise men, especially when these days seem dark. A divided country, covid still knocking at the door, a rampant lack of trust across the board: there are days when it would be easier to throw in the towel, to let darkness have its way.

But the wise men remind us that if we are on the lookout, the light of Christ still shines in this world, still guides our steps, still calls us to follow — not just so we can end up in the right place, but so that we can reflect the light of Christ all along the way.

Or as Isaiah might say: “Arise, shine; for your light has come...” (60:1).

Amen.