

January 7, 2018  
Matthew 2:1-2, 7-12  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

### **“Game of Thrones”**

**Good morning and Happy Epiphany! As you probably already know, December 26 through January 6 are the twelve days of Christmas. January 6 was celebrated as Twelfth Night in England, immortalized by the name of a play by William Shakespeare; in many countries, Italy, Spain, and the former Spanish colonies in Mexico and Central and South America, January 6 is Three Kings’ Day. If you’re Ben Prah, Jenny Cooper, or even Rosemary Pletcher, you may be expecting gifts around this time because of your birthday, but in some places, Three Kings’ Day is when gifts are exchanged in honor of the Christ child.**

**As we finish the story of Jesus’ birth and follow the characters which we find in Matthew and Luke’s gospels, we want to be sure and mention these guys -- you already heard from one of them this morning. Matthew is the only gospel writer who mentions them, and a lot of what we think we know is traditional rather than scriptural. We know that they came from the East and that they were skilled at reading the stars, and may have been familiar with Jewish prophecy about a coming Messiah. We know what gifts they brought, and that these things were over-the-top luxury items fit for a king, rather than for a peasant family in humble circumstances.**

**We don’t know how many of these wise men there were -- more than one; tradition says three because there were three gifts; we don’t know that they rode camels -- although a camel sounds more exciting than a donkey, foreign vehicles have a certain allure, so we can imagine a Ferrari rather than a Cadillac; we don’t know how long they traveled -- but Herod ordered baby boys under the age of two to be killed, so it must have been a while. We don’t know if the wise men told anyone about Jesus after they visited him, or if they ever made it**

back home. Remember, adventures don't have safe and predictable outcomes. I think it's interesting to consider what these characters are doing in the gospel story, and what we might be able to learn from them.

In order to consider the role of the wise men, we need to take a look at their narrative foil, King Herod. I don't know if any of you follow the HBO series "Game of Thrones." I had heard enough about that television series, that I did what I usually do: I read the book. I read only the first in the series by George R. R. Martin. It's got a lot of sex and intrigue and violence, and it's got nothing on the real-life history of Herod. If you've ever read an epic novel, they often have family trees at the beginning, to help track the characters and their relationships. The chart of the Herods gets tangled up pretty quickly, and it makes 21<sup>st</sup> Century politics look tame. The first thing to clear up about Herod, is that "Herod" is a *title*, not a name; when we call someone Mr. President, his name isn't 'President,' that's his title. The Herod was the ruler appointed by the Romans, who were the ones with the real power. The guy whom the wise men visited was the first Herod: he called himself Herod the Great (of course) or Herod, King of the Jews. The Jews weren't entirely happy about this. Herod claimed to be a Jew, but he didn't always act like one. Herod took on a lot ambitious building projects: a port, a couple fortresses -- including Masada -- and notably improvements to the Temple in Jerusalem, which he called Herod's Temple (of course.) Faithful Jews preferred to think of it as God's Temple. He built a large palace for himself called the Herodium (of course.) Herod also did building projects for his pagan subjects -- and taxed the Jews heavily to pay for them. Many Jews had contempt for the Roman puppet king who called himself "King of the Jews." Herod was both scornful and obsessed with what his subjects thought of him, and they suspected he had his secret police monitoring them. A first century historian wrote that "[Herod] was prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition."

And that was just his political life; here's a little snapshot of his personal life: he was passionately jealous of his wife, Mariamne. She found out that he was plotting to kill her, so she stopped sleeping with him, and he accused her of adultery so he could execute her. Her mother, Alexandre, testified against her; Mariamne was executed

**and Alexandre declared herself queen, and Herod had her executed, too. It was one of this Herod's sons, Herod Archelaus who married his sister-in-law and ordered John the Baptist beheaded. Can you see why you need a chart to keep track of all this?**

**So into this crazy family political mess, come some foreign astrologers, asking where they can find the King of the Jews, so they can honor him. It is interesting, and important for our understanding of this story, to note that these wise men are not Jewish. All of the human characters in our story so far -- including Jesus -- would have considered themselves Jews. Even Herod. We know these astrologers are no fools -- they're called wise men, after all -- and they were smart enough to follow a star which no one else had noticed, and to understand that the star meant a king had been born. A great big, spanking new palace is the logical place to go looking for an infant king in a country that is not your own. The wise men seem to have no idea what craziness they stepped into, and what the consequences would be for the little town of Bethlehem.**

**I have spent some time the past few weeks pondering a question for which I have no good answer: what kind of God would allow soldiers to kill baby boys on the orders of a crazy, paranoid old man? It isn't the first account of a slaughter of innocents -- we have a similar account in Genesis of the Egyptian Pharaoh ordering Hebrew baby boys to be killed, and of the resistance of Egyptian midwives and the stealth of Hebrew families like Moses' mother and his sister, Miriam. God does not prevent the death of these innocents, but in both cases, God provides a way out; out of Egypt for the Hebrews, and back to Egypt for Jesus and his parents.**

**I believe that this cameo appearance of the wise men in Matthew's gospel is intended to give us a portrait of what a real king should look like: and the real king is certainly not Herod, and it isn't even the wise men. The real king is Jesus. And Jesus is the opposite of all of the intrigue and ambition and paranoia that's going on at the Herodium. Bethlehem is only a few kilometers distant from Jerusalem, but it's a world away from worldly power. Herod is a cray old tyrant, Jesus is an innocent toddler; Herod is wealthy, Jesus is from a peasant family; Herod is obsessed with what people think of him and his subjects**

**hate him, even Gentiles recognize Jesus as king and worship him of their own free will.**

**This, I think is the genius of Matthew's account of the magi, and why it deserves to have such a grip on our imagination. Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience. He begins his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus: twenty-one generations grouped in three sets of the sacred number 7 to establish Jesus' Messiah credibility. Matthew consistently refers to Jesus as the Messiah, the Anointed One, the promise of Israel. But Matthew's gospel is also sharply critical of the Jewish leaders of his day, the Pharisees, who interpreted the law and were the religious insiders of their day, and they were pushing back HARD against the idea of Jesus as the Messiah. In this story of the wise men, Matthew acknowledges that the people who are trained to see, who are educated to see, who are *supposed to see*, are not always the ones with the clearest vision. These wise men are foreigners from another country and another religion, but they are the ones who recognize God's revelation and respond with worship. When the wise men first show up at the Temple in Jerusalem and say, "Great, we made it. Where's the baby king we came to see?" Herod sends the scribes and chief priests to check the prophecies--sure enough, it was there: the baby was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea; it was written in the ancient scrolls all along. And if that's not enough, the sign that the wise men followed was a star: tough to think of a more public sign than a star. This was not secret knowledge: what the wise men saw had been hidden in plain sight: they were just the ones to recognize its significance and to be willing to pack up their Ferraris and see where the star was leading.**

**This should be a lesson in humility for all of us, and especially for me. I'm no Herod (praise God), but I'm not sure I'm a wise woman, either. I have been educated to see, and try to practice seeing where God is leading: I'm certainly *supposed to see*. But I'm on the inside of this system; If the insiders are so self-absorbed that they miss blazing stars, God will find other people who are paying attention. Sometimes outsiders see things that people "in the know" have missed. Sometimes outsiders bring gifts that are more precious than we have considered, or even imagined. Sometimes outsiders experience King Jesus with a joy and worship which we have**

**forgotten. Sometimes the people who think they know what God is doing can miss the things which God has hidden in plain sight.**

**As we journey away from the manger in the coming weeks and months, I encourage you to keep looking up. Get out from inside, and be courageous enough to stand in the darkness. What new stars are out that we may have missed? What messengers are speaking whom we should be listening to? What do outsiders have to teach us about where God is leading, and about the joy of finding Jesus?**

**Epiphany means “revelation,” or insight. On this celebration of Three Kings’ Day, I hope that is the gift we receive and share. May God bless us as we seek the Christ child together. Amen.**