

Sermon for January 1, 2017
"Matt and the Wise Men"

Matthew 2:1-12

We imagine the three wise men coming to the manger only moments after Jesus is born on the heels of Luke's shepherds. That is how most Christian artists portray their arrival. It is how we depict it in manger scenes and nativity plays. That is fine, because the arrival of the kings communicates the faith that Jesus was born the King of Kings. It is only natural for us to conflate the stories of the nativity from Luke and Matthew into one.

But that is not the story that Matthew tells. A careful reading shows that he does not tell of magi visiting an infant at a manger. From Matthew's telling, the visit of the Magi happened years after the birth. Matthew does not use the Greek word for infant, *brefos* (βρεφος), which can mean either an unborn infant or a newborn, but the word for small child, *paidion* (παιδιον). So as Matthew tells the story, the baby Jesus was at least a toddler not an infant. He also uses the word for house, *oikian* (οικιαν), not the word for manger, *fatnh* (φατνη), as in Luke. Also Herod ordered all the boys two and under killed because of the time of the star's appearing. As Matthew tells the story, Herod obviously believed that Jesus had been born two years before.

What follows is a story based partially on that scholarly analysis. This story on based partially on what the Bible says. But much of it is from this preacher's imagination of the events. It is a story designed to help us see the light of Christ's arrival in a new way.

"A Boy Named Matt"

Once upon a time there was a boy named Matt. He was no different from other boys his age in his day. Every day Matt did his chores: milk the goats, get the water, sweep the roof. And on the Sabbath, the one break in his uneventful life, he would go to the synagogue. Matt was not old enough to join the men, but he was old enough to stand with his mother and intently listen to the men discuss the Torah and the prophets. Matt hoped for the day when he too would stand before the people and read that sacred books, and speak of Moses and the commandments and David and the Messiah.

One morning Matthew awoke. It was the Sabbath! Today there would be no goats except maybe the goat God gave Abraham to sacrifice instead of Isaac. Today there would be no carrying water, but maybe he would hear of water gushing from a rock in the desert. Today there would be no roof to sweep, but maybe he would hear of the roof where Daniel prayed to God. Matt excitedly dressed, and the family went to the synagogue. As they approached the synagogue they separated. Matt's father went into the inner room where the men read the holy books and Matt went with his mother to stand outside the latticework wall that separated the women and children from the men. Matt pulled his mother up close to the lattice wall so he could hear the Scriptures read.

The rabbi was away so a young carpenter read the Scripture. Matt had seen him before but didn't know him well. He looked over at the carpenter's family: a young woman with a small boy clinging to her robe. The face of Mary, the carpenter's wife, seemed to beam with pride as she watched her husband. Her glow seemed to engulf the young boy toddling at her feet. The carpenter opened the Isaiah scroll and read, "Arise shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." "Arise shine!" The words echoed in Matt's head. God says, "Arise shine!" How like the Sabbath that was. A day when one would arise and shine. A day that one wakes up happy.

Matt had been so intent on these two words that he missed the rest of the reading. Joseph rolled up the scroll and sat down. Then he spoke in slow measured words. It was obvious he was not used to doing this. He was not the Rabbi, but Matt listened anyway. Joseph spoke of the Messiah. The word seemed to sing. "Messiah!" He spoke of how the rabbis say the Messiah's coming will be a bright day and what a great event it would be. Then Joseph said, "But." The word echoed. After a long nervous pause he continued, "Maybe the Messiah's coming will not be such a big event. Maybe he will come quietly." There was some mumbling among the men. "Maybe some will miss his coming." The mumbling grew. Matt noticed that Joseph was looking toward his wife. But Joseph was not looking at Mary. He was smiling and staring at the boy toddling at her feet.

The Sabbath came and went. Sunday morning arrived. There would be no arising and shinning today. There would be no goats caught in thickets or water gushing from rocks or prophecies

about Messiah. It was milk the goats, fetch the water, sweep the roof. The water was first. So Matt took the large jars and made his way to the well outside of town.

He slowly lowered the bucket into the well to draw the water. Matt didn't hear the camels approach. He wouldn't have known they were there if he hadn't overheard the word "Messiah." He quickly turned and saw three finely dressed men on camels. They were speaking Greek or something, but he picked out a few words like, "Messiah," "Bethlehem," and "Herod." Matt noticed that they were looking off to the horizon. Then one of the men pointed as he spoke and Matt turned to look. A light. Like a star! But it was daylight. Stars don't shine in the daylight. It seemed to move for a moment, but then it stopped. Right over the carpenter's house? He had never seen anything like it. A star in the daylight!

"Boy!" The harsh voice brought him out of a daze. One of the servants was standing over him. "When the Magi speaks, you answer him." One of the men on the camels brushed off the servant with the wave of his hand. "Don't yell at the boy. He is just amazed by the light. Tell me boy do you see that light?" He spoke with an exotic foreign accent. "Yes sir! I've never seen anything like it!" The Magi smiled. "We have been following that star a long way and it has finally stopped. Can you tell us whose house that is?" "Yes sir! I think it is the house of the carpenter, Joseph." The three men mumbled among themselves and looked a little bewildered. "Boy, could you take us there to this Joseph the carpenter's house?" "Yes sir!"

When they arrived at the house the doorway was quickly filled with Magi and servants. Matt ran around to the side to watch through the window. The three men brought presents to give to Joseph and Mary. No, they were giving them to the child? He heard the men speak, but this time in Hebrew. Hebrew, like in the synagogue, but spoken with Gentile accents. "Gold to crown the King of kings." "Frankincense, to worship the Son of God." "Myrrh to anoint the Lamb of God."

How like the Sabbath this was. Watching through the latticework. Listening to the sacred language spoken. Words like "Messiah" and "Lord" heard through a window. And talk of sacrificial lambs and worship.

Matt slowly wandered back to the well as he thought of these things. "The King of Kings?" "Messiah!" Could it be that the Messiah spoken of by the prophets had come? Could it be that he had seen the Messiah the anointed one of God play at the carpenter's shop around the corner and in the synagogue down the street? Joseph had said the Messiah might come quietly, and that some would miss him. But the child looked so ordinary. Maybe God is in the ordinary. In the Sundays and Mondays as well as the Sabbaths and holy days. Maybe God is in the milking of the goat, the fetching of water, the sweeping of the roof and in the language of everyday life. Matt looked up at the light of the star. Why had he not seen it before? How could he miss a star so bright unless he had never looked? Was it there all along just like the carpenter's child?

When Matt arrived at the well the jars were full of water. Matt didn't remember filling them. He tasted the water and it was sweet like wine. He took the jars and, despite their weight, his steps were lighter than before. Like his steps on the way to the Synagogue on the Sabbath. And he thought of Kings and gifts and of the Messiah. It was just like the Sabbath all over again. "Arise shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Even when the Sabbath was over!

Matthew, or Matt, was right. God is in the ordinary, the everyday. We arise and shine looking for God on Sunday morning. We expect to see the glory and light on God in special days like Christmas and Easter.

But God was really there all along in the average work of everyday. God is in Mondays and Tuesdays and ordinary days just as much in the holidays or Holy days. The problem is we just aren't looking; that is why we don't see it.

Once the excitement of shepherds and angels are over there are few who can still see the glory of God shining from heaven. When the singing of heavenly choirs has finished there are few who can still hear the voice of God. We close our eye in spiritual sleep when the Christmas Sabbath is over and we can't see the glory of God in our midst revealed in the Christ child.

Keep your eyes open this year. Even after Christmas is over look for God's glory. It is there like the star and the Christ child in that story. But only the truly wise are able to point it out. "Arise and Shine for your light has come." Look! A star! A light from heaven! Look!