

December 19, 2021 Christmas Is About Hope Pt. 4
Matthew 2:1-12, Hebrews 2:14-15

Christmas is about hope! That is why the Magi mounted this expedition that caused them to be travelling for 2 years. They were compelled by the evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures. They had seen the star, and their research led them to believe, not as a committee, but individually and independently, in their home towns, in their native lands, that the star was a sign. A king had been born to the Jews. A king who would shepherd his people. Not just leading them, not just ruling them, but caring for them, bringing them that most elusive of gifts, peace of mind, peace that would touch their hearts, peace that would touch their souls. They wanted to go and see this marvelous infant. Not just for his station, but for what he would accomplish. They wanted to worship HIM.

Mary was visited by an angel who announced she would give birth to a son, that her pregnancy would be the result of the work of the Holy Spirit of God. She submitted to the message of the angel. She gave herself to the destiny that God was unfolding for her. She did not pretend to understand where it would take her, what it would all mean to her. She keeps in her heart the bits and pieces of what she sees happening, through it all. She finds herself following her son Jesus, down the dusty roads of Galilee. She hears HIS teaching. She witnesses water turned to wine, sickness replaced by wholeness and health. The blind see. The leprous are cleansed. She follows her son, down the Via Dolorosa. She witnesses HIS

death on the cross. She witnesses the empty tomb, and carries the message of the angel, to the disciples who reject the truth.

Joseph's life was turned upside down. He was going to get married to Mary. Then, because he was righteous, and she was with child, he decided to break off his relationship with her. He never even considered the child. An angel of God changed that. Joseph makes new plans to be married to Mary, and to name the child when it is born. To do what a father does. To provide so far as he is able. He teaches Jesus to follow in his footsteps...to be a builder. He and Mary raise a family. And then Joseph dies, before Jesus ministry begins.

The Shepherds are petrified with fear when the angel breaks into their lives. They have reason. They have been taught all their lives that they are unclean because of what they do. They fear the judgement of God. They are afraid in the light of the sight of angels. But they hear the message which the angel brings them. A child is born for them. And they run...well they go in haste...to Bethlehem to see if it is true. Can it be true. They find it hard to believe. And then they find the stable, a small cave-like structure, and Mary and Joseph and the baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger. They rejoice. They go back to their work singing praises to God. Who would have thought? They could feel...worthy of the grace of God!

You see, the Magi are in a unique class all their own. They start out their journey, like Abraham, not really

knowing where they are going. They follow the direction set by this new star in the night sky, which means they do not so much travel in the day as they travel in the night. Stars in the sky they understand. They keep going westward. They know what they are looking for. They know exactly what to say when they arrive in Jerusalem. “Where is the baby who is born to be the King of the Jews? We have seen HIS star in the East, and we have come to worship HIM.” Naïve, perhaps, especially with Herod. But they know exactly what they are looking for, and they expect the Jews to be able to answer their questions. Where is He? We know He is close...has to be! We want to kneel before HIM,....to worship HIM.” Matthew tells us Herod was disturbed by the news, and Jerusalem as a city was disturbed with him. If the Magi are right, this is going to change everything! We don’t like change. We cope with it. And Herod decides precisely how to cope with this change. He helps the Magi. He invites them to come and share the news of where the child can be found. Herod intends to cope with this change, so that things will remain the same.

The uniqueness of the Magi, and the nature of their quest is different from everyone else’s story. Mary was seeking to be obedient to God in spite of the problems and the grief that appeared to come with obedience. Joseph opted out. And when he opted back in it was that he too might be obedient to God. The shepherds wanted to see with their own eyes what they found hard to believe. As I have said so many times we have a lot in common with the shepherds.

But the Magi? By the time they mounted their camels and began their journey with the caravan that accompanied them, they know exactly what they are up to. They want to find the child that is born to be King. They want to worship HIM! On their knees. They are Gentiles, not Jewish. They present their gifts to the child, at the house where Mary and Joseph are living in Bethlehem. Gold because HE is the King of Kings. Frankincense because HE is very God of very God. And Myrrh because HE is born to live and grow up, to minister, to teach and to heal, and then when the moment is exactly the right moment, to die on the cross at Golgotha and rise the 3rd day.

I do not pretend to think that the Magi understood all of that. In fact that the details were shrouded in mystery, made the quest all that more compelling. It was enough that they had done their scholarly research. A star for something life changing and important to the whole of the world. The Scriptures of the Jews prophesied the birth of a King who would be a wonderful counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, whose rule would never end. "We have come to worship HIM." That is what they told people of whom they asked directions. That's what they told Herod. And in Bethlehem that is what they did. I never cease to marvel at the artistry of Barbara's Nativity set...shepherds are present, the animals are there at the stable. But the Magi...robed in all their splendor...they are on their knees.

In 6 days, it will be Christmas. The Pandemic may mean we cannot gather together because of the danger. But the Pandemic has no power over the fact of Christmas. The significance of the 25th of December is not related to a birth certificate, but the fact, that during the festival of lights, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. And the best commentary I could offer you on the significance of that birth is offered in the Letter to the Hebrews chapter 2, verses 14 and 15. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death, he might destroy him, who holds the power of death---that is the devil---and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It is a matter of history. Jesus ministered, healing and cleansing people for 3 years. The majority of that time was spent in Galilee. It is a matter of history. Jesus travelled to Jerusalem, where HE was arrested, tried, and crucified. Dead and buried, HE was placed in the tomb. Matters of history, acknowledged by scholars who do not pretend to believe in HIM, as well as by many who do believe. The 3rd day, on a Sunday morning, HE rose from the dead, and was seen over the next week and the week after that by many witnesses. Matters of history. Jesus saves. This is so important HIS birth literally divides time as we measure it into before HIM, and after HIM. A.D. means in the year of our Lord. To replace it with CE, Christian Era, is a simple attempt to take Jesus out of the equation. Nice try, but the Christians Era is not what divides time....it is Jesus.

We sing the carols in perilous times. We sing them because we must. And because we want to do so. Because the simple truth is...Christmas is about Jesus. And therefore we have hope. Hope as we grapple with the realities of the present. Hope as we look to the future, because God in Christ has revealed to us HIS heart. He loves us. As the martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer said to his cell mate as he was about to walk to his execution by the Nazis, "This is not the end for me, it is the beginning." Christmas is about hope, through faith, in Jesus.

Let us pray;

Lord, God Almighty, you bestowed on Mary a very precious gift. She served you. You gave Joseph the blessing of responsibility. He served you, and kept the Christ child safe. You gave the gifts of faith and hope to the shepherds. They were filled with joy and went back to work, believing in YOU and glorifying your name. The Magi: You gave them conviction, and they came together and followed the star to Bethlehem. Touch us, with peace and joy, in the midst of this second Christmas, in the midst of Pandemic. Grant us we pray safety in dangerous times. But most importantly feed our faith in Jesus name, and grant us hope, that nothing can separate us from YOU, or YOUR love. Amen