

Year C, Epiphany1-Secret Plans

January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-6

### Secret Plans

Who are these Magi? Where did they come from; India, present day Iraq, present day Iran; who knows? All we know is that they came from elsewhere, from outside, from some other culture and some other religion. They were foreigners and that may be one of the points Matthew is making in including them in his story of the birth of Jesus.

Maybe Matthew saw them as the fulfillment of what the prophet Isaiah wrote:

*Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD'S glory has shone upon you. Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations, the LORD will shine upon you, God's glory will appear to you. Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance.*

Matthew says Jesus is the dawning radiance, the light that has come, the LORD'S glory. And do these kings represent the nations coming to his light? Does Matthew see something universal happening here; something powerful and outside the realm of divisive religion?

Our epistle lesson from Paul advances this same idea. Paul writes to the people in Ephesus, "This is why I, Paul, am a prisoner of Christ for you Gentiles." Gentiles aren't Jews or Christians; they are of every religious persuasion and none. When the Magi bring their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they symbolize the whole world placing their gifts before Jesus. Each culture brings what is valuable to it, what they have to share with the world and Jesus receives them all. Jesus, a baby in a poor and dominated country, in his radical weakness receives all their gifts. None are rejected, none considered unworthy.

While Jesus had to be born in a particular culture, he was born to us all and all are included in his family. His birth marks the beginning of the end of "us" and "them." And by the way, this week I ordered eight copies of [Life at the End of Us Vs Them](#) by Marcus Peter Rempel. We will engage this book in an after-coffee-hour class when I return from my vacation on January 27.

Generations prior to the birth of Jesus didn't know about this hidden plan that God has now revealed. Neither Jew nor Gentile knew they were parts of the same body, and that everyone would share the promises of God in Christ through the gospel. Even when people knew no other way to achieve unity other than sacrificing some for the benefit of the rest, the plan all

along was to complete creation through Jesus' life, death and resurrection by showing us how to forgive so that enmity wouldn't build up between us.

We don't need to unite around a corpse we have thrown out for now we can unite around the resurrected One who forgave us for throwing him out and asks us to forgive each other. Before Jesus was born we only knew how to temporarily unite around some poor soul or group of souls we excluded. Now, with his birth, something new has been born, a new way of uniting without throwing out. The wise men, being wise, sense something new signaled by in a new star that goes before them.

This is what Matthew points toward when he includes the coming of the Magi in his story of Jesus' birth. Their presence near the birth scene shows us that Jesus' coming precedes all religion and embraces all persons no matter their religion.

Usually religion is built on separation; separating those we think of as good from those we think of as bad; those who express their religion this way from those who express their religion that way. Jesus is not interested in separation. He wants to bring that which is separated into unity.

Matthew says "When they saw the star had stopped, they were filled with joy." Their longing for peace and harmony had found a focal point, a terminus, a particular child who would satisfy their longing. They were wise because after searching, risking and investing in their search, they wanted to make Jesus their model for living.

When Magi came from the east and asked where the new born king of the Jews is to be born, they didn't realize their good news would not be received with gladness by all. Herod and the political system that circled him, found it alarming. Empire does not like radical new things that might disturb its hold on privilege. "When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him." Even Herod and the governing elite were run by fear even as they made almost everyone else afraid too. A potential opponent to their power had been detected and they must take measures to protect themselves. "He (Herod) gathered all the chief priests and legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born."

The idea of a Messiah was a great hope for all the common people who suffered deeply throughout the land. Herod was against hope for hopeful people cause problems. He wanted people crushed and hopeless; to feel it useless to oppose him. He wanted to blot out their hope before it gained momentum.

After discovering that the child was to be born in Bethlehem, "Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared." Now that he has the coordinates of time and place he constructs a plan but does not disclose it to the wise men. He

lies to them when he tells them he wants to worship the child. We know he intends to kill the child.

Deceit and death, two tools of empire, are now fully employed. But not all truth can be rooted out. The child and his mother still remain and the wise men go home by another way as they had been warned in a dream. I wonder if the warning came from the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, the Spirit come from outside the human sphere. Was it the same Spirit that Paul mentions who, at the right time, reveals the mystery of Christ to the prophets and apostles, including Paul?

It turns out Herod wasn't the only one who had a secret; God had one too and he has had it since the beginning of time. This secret had just been revealed at the birth of Christ and constitutes the epiphany, the seeing of the light, that we acknowledge on January 6<sup>th</sup>. With Jesus' birth God completes creation. Paul has been called by God to reveal to the Gentiles this new light emanating from a non-violent and forgiving God the world could not see because of its own violence. As Paul says, "God sent me to reveal the secret plan that has been hidden since the beginning of time by God who created everything."

St. Paul goes on, "God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles." The good news contains the message that everyone, even foreign kings and philosophers, even violent men like Paul, have "bold and confident access to God through faith in him." Through the forgiveness revealed on the cross, all barriers have been removed and no one is excluded. Jesus has shown us the open and welcoming face of God and even empire can't stop it. It's too late. It's already happened. He has been born. Thanks be to God!