

## The Last Chapter?

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

In college, some students change their major every semester. Not me. I came in knowing that I wanted to be a pastor, so I was a religion major from day one. For one semester, however, I decided to double major, adding English to my studies. Ultimately I ended up dropping it as a major, but I did end up working on the newspaper and as a writing tutor. I was even invited to be part of the English club.

All of this is to say that I feel fully qualified to announce this morning that Epiphany is not the last chapter of the Christmas story. As I was preparing my sermon this week, that seems to be the line most pastors start with. After all, Epiphany is celebrated just two weeks after Christmas. And it is the last Biblical story about Jesus' early childhood. Clearly, when we welcome the wise men, we welcome the end of the Christmas story.

But what if this isn't the last chapter of the Christmas story? What if, instead, it's the first chapter of something new? You don't need to be an English major to follow my train of thought this morning. All you need to remember you learned in 8<sup>th</sup> grade English class, when you studied the short story. All we need is to look at the setting, the characters, and the plot. Well, and we need to look at the rest of the story.

You see, the Scripture reading for today only tells the warm, fuzzy part of the Epiphany story. After the wise men leave by another road, things get interesting. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph, telling him to take his family and hide in Egypt. Immediately. They had just escaped when Herod issued an order that all boys 2 years old and under should be killed. Murdered. These are innocent babies and toddlers. Of course, Herod himself eventually dies, but it's still not safe for the Holy Family to return. Herod's son was now ruling over Judea, so Jesus' family settled in the tiny village of Nazareth in Galilee.

So, now you know the rest of the story. And though it is disturbing, this second half of the story needs to be told with the first half. They clearly go together. But the question for us now is does this story belong to Christmas? Or to something else?

Well, let's start by looking at the setting. When Jesus is born, the setting is Bethlehem. A stable behind an inn that is already too full. Where are we in the Epiphany story? Not in a barn, but in a house. And if you recall your junior high English class, setting includes not only the place but the time. On Christmas, Jesus is a newborn. We don't know how old he is at Epiphany, but Herod sends an order to kill children as old as 2 years old. So Jesus is likely at least a year old. Probably closer to a year and a half. There's a huge difference between 18 minutes old and 18 months old. The setting has changed significantly.

Okay, so let's take a look at the characters. You call them out – who are the main characters in the Christmas story? (Mary/Joseph, Jesus, shepherds, innkeeper) Where are they in our story this morning? In the first half, only Mary and Jesus remain, and even they are only mentioned in passing. The characters who take the main stage in the Epiphany story are the wise men and Herod. Yes, Joseph reappears in the second half of the story, but only to respond to

actions taken by Herod. The active characters in Epiphany are not the same as the ones in the Christmas story.

Okay, let's move on to plot. A good story introduces the setting and characters, then exposes a conflict. The rest of the story is about how that conflict ends, smoothly or otherwise. At Christmas, the plot is that God will send a Messiah. But there are a variety of obstacles that could prevent this from happening. Mary isn't married – how will Joseph react? The census takes them away from home. And of course, the final conflict, there's no room in the inn! The plot is resolved, however, when Mary gives birth in a humble manger and even the shepherds come to see him and spread the word.

The plot is resolved! The story should be over. Now, I suppose the wise men could just be further resolution. That is, here comes someone other than the shepherds to see Jesus and spread the word. Actually, if we only read the first half of this story, that's exactly how it functions. But there's more action after our reading. It's high drama, actually. An English student might suggest that we have a new conflict, a new plot, a new story.

It seems to me that starting with the prophets of the Old Testament, the plot is all about God sending a Messiah. Christmas is the final chapter of that story. But it turns out, that's only Book 1. (Or technically, Book 2, since Book 1 is probably the story of God relating directly to people like Abraham and Moses. But I digress.) So Christmas wraps up Book 2 – God promises to send a Messiah. And Epiphany opens up Book 3.

So what's the new plot? Well, hold on to that question for a moment as we look at the next three chapters. In chapter 1, the wise men come from far away, drawn only by a vague sign, to adore the future king. Yes, there's major conflict with Herod that continues to drive the story, but the main point of chapter 1 is the visit of the wise men. In chapter 2, we jump ahead 10-12

years. Jesus is back at the temple in Jerusalem, this time for Passover. When his family leaves, he stays behind, reading and debating with the priests and scholars. When questioned, he innocently declares that naturally, he was hanging out in his father's house. In chapter 3, we jump ahead another 20 years or so to the wilderness by the river Jordan. Jesus approaches and asks John the Baptist to do what he does best, and baptize him. When he comes up out of the water, we hear the voice of God claim Jesus as his son.

After these three stories, we fall into a regular rhythm of storytelling. Jesus goes around teaching, healing, and doing stuff. These three stories, however, aren't really connected to the ongoing plots of either Christmas or Jesus' ministry. But can you see what they have in common? What the unifying plot is, despite the drastic changes in setting? All three chapters attempt to tell us just who Jesus is.

Four prophecies are mentioned in the Epiphany story. First, that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, an otherwise insignificant town. Second, that Jesus would be called out of Egypt. Third, Rachel weeping for the loss of innocent children. And fourth, that Jesus would live in Nazareth. Really, that's a lot of prophecy in a really short space. And so the Epiphany story really reinforces the idea that Jesus isn't just a prophet or a nice guy, but the Messiah, the one who has been promised. Also, notice that three of the four prophecies tell us about Jesus' identity and where he comes from.

And in a lovely bit of foreshadowing, the Epiphany story also reveals that Jesus will be Messiah to more than just the Jews. The shepherds came to worship Jesus in the Christmas story. Why do we need to know that wise men also came to worship him? Because they represent everything the shepherds aren't. The shepherds were poor and Jewish. The wise men were

wealthy and foreign. The shepherds interpreted the signs to say that Jesus was the Messiah. The wise men saw him as the King of kings.

In the temple story, when Jesus is about 12, we learn about his character a bit. He's smart and wise, and confident enough to engage in debate with the experts. He's your average teenager who feels like he can do his thing instead of hanging out with his parents. But in this case, his words are more important than his actions. He says he is at his Father's house. Twelve years old, and he's already claiming to be the Son of God. And then when Jesus is baptized, we hear that identity affirmed when God's voice calls out, "This is my beloved Son."

So between Christ's birth and his ministry, we have three stories that announce Jesus as the Messiah, the King of kings, and the Son of God. And while those might be titles we take for granted, they are hugely significant. If one person bears all those titles, he is someone worth listening to.

And so, Epiphany is not the end of Christmas. (though we still want your help taking down the decorations after church). Because it's not the end, it's a beginning! Jesus hasn't begun his ministry yet. But we are beginning our walk of faith. Starting with the important step of building faith and trust that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah. That once he starts preaching and teaching, we will want to listen to him. On Epiphany, we think of Jesus as the one holding still, while the wise men travel to see him and to return home. But in the part of the story we didn't read, Jesus and his family have to flee. Jesus is on the move. And so we must be on the move to follow him. The journey begins now. Amen and amen.