

The Unexpected Gift
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
John Knox Presbyterian Church – January 3, 2016

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.

We all like to hear the story of the “3 Kings.” Right before the Christmas school break, I can recall the Discovery Time children dressing up for the retelling of the nativity story. The boys thought it was super cool and most all of them wanted to be the Kings in the story. And this past weekend, I was at Hallmark looking for the half-priced gift wrap and finding half-priced nativity scenes. They always come with these 3 majestic men clothed in beautiful robes and jewels riding on camels. We would never picture these men as pagans traveling in a caravan with peddlers and magicians like one commentator suggests. (Feast on the Word; Paul Achtemeier; Westminster John Knox Press; 2009; p.213)

Then there is Nadia Bolz-Weber, who is an ordained minister in the Lutheran denomination. She can be a little snarky at times. She sharply points out in her book *Accidental Saints – Finding God in All the Wrong People* that scripture mentions nothing about the number of men who come to see Jesus nor do they visit him in a barn or stable but a house. And these men are from the East, we have no idea how far east. Is it the Orient? Or is it New Jersey? They were not kings at all but wise men. (Accidental Saints – Finding God in All the Wrong People; by Nadia Bolz-Weber; Convergent Books; 2015; p. 74)

These men were astrologers. Perhaps, they were considered “wise” men because they studied the heavens, searching for signs. They had sighted a magnificent star and decided to follow it. For weeks, months maybe years, they followed it believing that this star would lead them to a king.

And there is no way we want to hear about despicable King Herod who takes up 8 out of the 12 verses in our scripture today. It is clear that he is threatened by the possibility of another king in power. Even though this is a child-king, he will one day grow into a man

and be a great danger to him. And later, we read on to find that once Herod is tricked he sends his troops out to kill all boy toddlers and babies. King Herod is truly an evil man!

We hear of these wise men searching for a king and finding him under the brilliant light of the star over Bethlehem. This king is not what they expected. I would love to have been a fly on the wall when they found that he was poor and simple. They did not find him in a grand palace but a humble dwelling probably belonging to one of Joseph's distant relatives.

But something had to tell them that he was special because they knelt down and paid homage to him. They worshiped him. They are greeted by Mary, who I am sure as a proud mama told them how special her little boy was. I wonder if Mary shared what the angel Gabriel, her cousin Elizabeth and Anna or Simeon in the temple told her. These men somehow figured out that this child-king was God's Son, the Messiah. We see this in the amazing gift which they give to him and have great significance. They give him gold for a king. They give him frankincense for a Deity, a God. They give him myrrh for one day he will die and because he is the Messiah will save the world. This was not the king that they expected. This was a king who would not rule or take with power but be a gift for all people. What does this gift mean for you and I today?

It was the Sunday after Christmas, the day where most pastors take the day off from preaching and reread the Christmas texts and sing the favorite hymns. This is simply called "Lessons and Carols". But this was not an ordinary Christmas. No, this was December 2012. The year that Adam Lanza decided to get up kill his mother, go to Sandy Hook Elementary School and kill 26 students and teachers and then commit suicide. No, this was a Sunday where Nadia Bolz-Weber knew she had to preach. She had to preach to give people hope and light in the midst of their hopelessness and darkness.

Nadia chose our text today, Matthew 2, for her sermon. As she began to prepare, she knew she wanted to talk about the unexpected gift of Jesus Christ, who God sends into the world for people just like the wise men, just like you and me. She also wanted to make it clear that the violence and evil spirit of King Herod is just like what we have in our world today. But it is this world that God chose for his fragile child Son to live in. God takes the risk for his Son to become flesh and blood and dwell in this kind of world.

As she planned with her staff for worship, she decided during the prayers of the people that she would read the names of Adam's victims and their ages. And after each reading, there would be a bell that rang out. They all agreed that would be a great idea.

But, it was her intern who spoke up, "Shouldn't Adam's name be added to the list?" She said, "Oh NO!" There was no way she was going to include him. This young man continued to press. She knew he was right but she couldn't make herself go there. But she kept hearing him ask, "Nadia, wouldn't God want this?" She finally gave-in shouting, "Fine! But, I want it to be known that I am in opposition to God's grace!" His response, "I am sure God is hurt!" (Accidental Saints – Finding God in All the Wrong People; by Nadia Bolz-Weber; Convergent Books; 2015)

There it was! She had almost forgotten the most important part of the message. God not only sent his Son into the violent and faithless world to live in it but also to save it! God comes into the world and shines a brilliant star for all people...the wise men and the

ordinary people like you and me. But here is the extremely hard part, God also comes into the world for the Herods, the Adam Lanzas, the terrorists, for ISIS! Every single one of us, God comes to shine a light that no darkness will overcome. It is how we accept that light that matters. And as Christians (dog gone it!), we have to share that light.

So, on that Sunday, Nadia read the names. As she came to the last one, she reached down into the very core of her being and with all her strength said, “And in obedience to God’s command to love the enemy and pray for those who persecute us” and then she uttered “Adam Lanza”. The final bell rang. (Accidental Saints – Finding God in All the Wrong People; by Nadia Bolz-Weber; Convergent Books; 2015; p. 74)

Thanks be to God who enters a world that is not filled with peace but enters a world that is loved by God and is worthy of saving. Amen.