

The Epiphany of Our Lord
St. Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

When it comes to Christmas, American Christianity (and even American Civil Religion in some respects) tends to be overly sentimental. Manger scenes are set up in a style that creates a peaceful scene with the animals in quiet awe of the Birth of the Creator of the Universe. Christmas pageants are performed with cute children dressed as angels and shepherds in oversized bath robes. And the entire world gathers to sing “Silent Night,” as if to pretend that it will “sleep in heavenly peace” that night.

Now, don’t get me wrong. In order to be heard at this time of year, even the secular artists cannot shy away from songs that proclaim the birth of the Savior of the World. It is Christmas, after all. But it’s almost always done with a bunch of sap and schmaltz and false ideas of peace and what it means that the Prince of Peace has been born.

The reality of the Nativity—and what follows—is anything but peaceful. First, there’s childbirth. If you’ve ever witnessed it, it is hardly ever peaceful and silent. And Jesus’ birth was, perhaps, especially strange; being born in a barn, if there were sheep, oxen, cows, donkeys, and camels about, they were likely not kneeling and silently attentive to the commotion going on in the stall where the people were, like you always see in the plastic, plaster, or pewter replicas that can be found around the world. You can also bet that the Infant didn’t spend much time in that manger; he had to be there when the shepherds came and found the family, but in addition to being swaddled, if He was awake, He was likely crying or nursing—it’s what babies do, and Jesus is fully baby at the Nativity.

And then there were those shepherds out in the fields tending to the sheep (so I guess maybe *they* weren’t in the stable). Things for them were certainly more peaceful and silent BEFORE the birth was announced. But, their silent, dark night was pierced by a bright heavenly light and the voice of an angel telling them, cowering in fear at this point, not to be afraid, but to go joyfully to find the Babe lying in a manger. It’s not everyday that you’ll find a sight such as this, and I’m not referring only to the angels, because even more showed up and began singing; I imagine the night was lit up like the day time.

So, in addition to animals milling about as she’s trying to calm her Baby, Mary then had to deal with visiting shepherds. I suppose it’s to be expected if you’ve just given birth in a barn, but still, some courtesy might have been appreciated. Of course, this was no ordinary Baby. This is the Son of God.

And what a world God was born into. It’s a world of harsh realities and despotic tyrants. But, that’s the kind of world that God came to redeem—to redeem and to save from those harsh realities and despotism. God, the Author of life, is born to conquer death, and that’s a harsh reality that the world has had to deal with for many millennia (and still has for the millennia since He was born).

Sometimes, those harsh realities and despotic tyrants go hand-in-hand. See Herod the Great; he’s the “king” of Judah at the time of Jesus’ birth, claiming the title, though placed on the throne by the Roman emperor. An Idumean by birth (an Edomite) he claimed the Jewish religion, though there are some who have questioned whether he really had. He’s the one to whom the Magi from the east go to find the King that was born. This is news to Herod, and of course it would have disturbed him greatly. He’s a despot, and has done some pretty despicable things to keep the power that he was given. Of course, little of that is ever mentioned in regard to the Nativity, but here goes:

- He supposedly had a secret police force whose purpose was to sway the people of Jerusalem in his favor by way of prohibiting and suppressing protests and having opponents removed by force.
- Additionally, he had a bodyguard of about 2000 soldiers.
- He had his own wife and two sons killed in order to protect his seat on the throne.

It’s a wonder that there’s never a figure of Herod included in those manger scenes.

So, it would make sense that Jerusalem was disturbed by the news of the birth of the King right along with Herod. It could be that anyone not disturbed by it would have been made to disappear by those secret police and bodyguards. Still, this fear over the birth of the Christ is on them, not solely on Herod.

The Magi's report of the birth of the King not only disturbed Herod, it enraged him. He called for the priests and scribes to tell him where the Christ was to be born. After they informed him, he told the Magi to go and report back where they find the Christ. He intended to kill the Child, though He told the Magi that he wanted to worship Him, too.

And about those priests and scribes; did they go with the Magi? No, they remained in Jerusalem. The Christ was born, and the only people who went from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see and worship Him are the Magi. If anyone else SHOULD have gone with them, it would have made sense for the scribes and priests to go. These were the experts in the Law and the Prophets—they reported from the prophet Micah exactly where the Christ was to be born. Is this the force of those secret police? Perhaps, but again, this apathy and fear and dread is on them as much as it is on Herod and his goons.

"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him." (John 1:11) The only people who marveled at the birth of the Christ are some lowly shepherds and some Gentile magicians, astrologers, astronomers. Every time I read this text and think about that, I wonder if, perhaps, a majority of the Jews of Jesus' time remained Jews, that only the lowly and despised among the Jews were joined by the lowly and despised among the Gentiles to receive the right to become children of God; that's something to look into more, I suppose. Anyway, these Gentile astrologers—they saw His sign in the stars and went looking for Him. So who are they?

They came from the east, which could have been from the region of the Persians. It's possible, but not corroborated by the Scriptures, that these are men who are descendants of the Babylonians and Persians who held the people of Judah captive in the time of Daniel and the three young men. In fact, they may even have been disciples of these wise men from Judah's past. They knew enough to see in the sign of the star the birth of the One who was to be born King of the Jews (even Herod interpreted this to mean the Christ), so they may have been introduced to the texts and teaching of the Jews by way of Daniel and the three young men.

These are the ones who received Jesus. Once they made their way to Bethlehem, they saw the star rest over the house where Mary and the Boy Jesus were. They opened their pouches and presented gifts to Him. And they bowed down and worshiped Him. These Gentiles knew who this Child was, more-so than Herod and Jerusalem and the priests and the scribes. Beyond the appointed Gospel lesson, nothing more is said of the faith of these men, be they two, three, or many more. But, "[A]s many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name..." (John 1:12)

And in a twist of irony, the One who comes to you with gifts here received gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

- Gold is a gift fit for a king. That's what you often hear, and it's true. By their giving it to Jesus, they acknowledge Him not only as king of the Jews, but King of kings—the One of whom the Law and the prophets had spoken who is the King and Ruler of the world. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you..." (Zechariah 9:9a) Additionally, the gold would also serve as financial stability for the time while the family was in exile in Egypt.
- Frankincense is a gift fit for a god. More than that, it is the Magi's gift acknowledging that Jesus is God. It is the common incense burned in prayer. "Let my prayer be set before You as incense, The lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." (Psalm 141:2)
- And most telling of all is the myrrh which is a gift fit for the dead. Myrrh is a spice which is used in the preparation of bodies for burial. It was among the spices that Nicodemus had brought with which to anoint the dead body of Jesus. (cf. John 19:39) It is likely among the spices that the

women brought to the grave when they found the stone rolled away because Jesus had risen from the dead. (cf. Luke 24:1) Still, just a living infant, the Magi's gift of myrrh was their way of acknowledging that He had come to die.

These three gifts say it all: King of kings, Lord of lords, very God of very God, born to die. Despite the world raging around them, the Magi make a solid confession of faith. Even the shepherds didn't get that much—or if they did, it isn't made known—they were simply told (and it is enough to know), "[T]here is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:11)

Herod, in his fit of rage, once he realized he had been tricked by the Magi, had all the male children in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, slaughtered. Weeping and lamentation were heard in Ramah, but not in Jerusalem. Rachel mourns for her children (cf. Matthew 2:16, 18), but it's impossible to say how much beyond that it gets. Nevertheless, this is the work of a tyrant.

It is the type of world that God was born into. The "silent nights" and "sleeping in heavenly peace" are sentimental compared to the reality of the Nativity. Jesus isn't born simply to be coddled. His birth didn't even bring peace on earth. In fact, His death didn't either. But, it is to this cacophony and chaos that Jesus is born, and out of this cacophony and chaos that He calls His own to Him: the shepherds at night, lit up by the angels; the Magi through troubled Jerusalem via the apathetic scribes and priests; you out of the darkness of this world. He does so because He loved them, and He loves you—loves you all to death!

So, sure, you live in the quaint little town of Elizabeth, or at least outside of the hustle and bustle of the large metropolis of Denver or Colorado Springs...for now, but even your nights are not peaceful nor necessarily silent. The cares and burdens of this life always weigh heavily on you:

- What are the medical tests going to reveal, or how will you come out of the surgery?
- Do you swerve left or right or not at all to avoid the drunk driver coming at you?
- Have you done enough to teach, catechize, and prepare your children? Will they remain faithful?
- What kind of world will be left to your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren?
- Why do all of these bad things keep happening to good people?

You live in the kind of world that sees people dying of illness, airplanes crashing into barriers, and schools and parties getting shot up and run through with pickup trucks. It's enough to make you want to pull your hair out and shout, "Why?"

And through all of this, despite all of this, *into* all of this, God deigns to be born. Furthermore, He deigns to endure all of it, too! From all of this, you have been redeemed, though for a while you must still bear the effects of it all—the pain and sorrow of illness, death, and loss. It's enough to make you doubt the providence and promises of God. But God did come. He was conceived and born. He was circumcised, lived, and died. And He rose again. He is King of kings, and so He is ultimately in charge and will see you through all of the cares and concerns of this life. He is God and Creator, and so He is also Savior and Redeemer. And He is the One who has died and is risen again, so He is the One who brings you from this life through death to life eternal. He is all of this and has done all of this for you, just as He has promised. He has come to and for you, does so even this evening, and will on the last day, and you have received Him, so He has given you the right to be called His children.

And if you are His children, then you are cared for. The gifts with which He cares for you are ever before you right here: the grace of the washing of regeneration in baptism, the word of absolution, and the eternal medicine of the eucharist. God is the giver of these gifts, and by them, He lifts you out of the near-hell of this life's existence to real, heavenly peace. It's a peace which the world cannot give, indeed, does not know, nor can it understand. It is a peace with God, a peace that will be realized ultimately on the last day when the King of kings returns to take you where He is. It is a peace that is expressed in the words that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of Jesus. Amen.