

Matthew 2:1-12
“The Good News and Bad News of Epiphany”
Year A: Epiphany Sunday
January 6, 2008
First United Methodist Church-Jefferson City
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There’s a story about a seminary professor who was leading a class of future ministers in a discussion on the 28th chapter of Matthew. Some of us may already be familiar with Matthew chapter 28: it’s actually the very end of that Gospel—the very last words that Jesus has to share in that particular book.

The setting for the chapter is very dramatic: Jesus has just been raised from the dead, but most of his disciples haven’t seen him yet. Only Mary Magdalene and the other Mary have seen him, and they tell the other followers of Jesus that he has been raised, and that he will meet them on the top of a mountain in Galilee, which is another name for the northern part of Israel.

And so, the disciples go running off to Galilee searching for Jesus, and sure enough, there on the top of the mountain, they find him, raised from the dead! It is then that Jesus speaks some of the most powerful words in the whole Bible, words which actually bring the Gospel of Matthew to a close: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” Jesus tells the disciples. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

These were the specific closing words which that seminary class was discussing when the professor began to offer some concluding remarks: “Jesus *promised* to be with the disciples always,” the professor said, “and because of that *promise*, they were empowered to begin to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. Because of Christ’s *promise* to be with them always, they could feel bold in the face of persecution and opposition. All because of that *promise*.” You know, the kind of stuff that seminary professors and ministers are supposed to say about God’s promises.

Well about that time one student raised her hand on the front row, and she said: “excuse me, professor, but I’m not so sure that Jesus saying he’d always be with the disciples is really that kind of a promise that you’re talking about.”

“Not a promise?” the professor was flabbergasted. “Then, what do you think it is?”

“Well,” the student answered, “Jesus saying he would always be with the disciples could have been more of a...kind of a *threat*.”

Now the professor was really confused. “A threat? How could it possibly be a threat?”

“Well,” the student continued, “if you think about it, there are at least a couple different ways Jesus could have spoken those lines: either he could have said them like:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to

obey everything that I have commanded you. [PAUSE--SMILE--VERY CONGENIAL, LIKE A GRANDFATHER] *And remember, I am with you always."*

"Or, " the student went, "Jesus could have said it like *this*:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. [START SHAKING FINGER] *And remember, I am with you always...[SNEER]...SO YOU BETTER NOT MESS UP!"*

Now, honestly, I kind of doubt that Jesus spoke those words as a threat. But that student still brought up a good point: sometimes what can sound like a promise to one person can come across as a threat to another. Sometimes what can sound like good news to some might seem like very bad news to others. Another great example of that kind of good news that can come across as bad news is the Scripture reading we just heard from Matthew. It's a story about bad news and good news all rolled up together as one—which is kind of what this Sunday is all about.

You see, January 6 is known as Epiphany on the Christian calendar. Epiphany is a very ancient festival in the Church—Christians in some parts of the world have been celebrating it for over 1800 years! It's called "Epiphany" because it celebrates the sudden *revealing* of something to someone. The word "Epiphany" itself comes from a Greek term which means "to *reveal*", "to appear",

or even “to shine upon”. In the Church we call January 6 “Epiphany” because that is the day when we celebrate the ways in which Jesus *revealed* God to the whole world. It used to be a pretty big holiday in the Church—almost as big as Easter—but over the centuries, for one reason or another, many folks just seem to have become less and less excited about a day set aside for celebrating the ways that Jesus Christ reveal God to the world. I’m not exactly sure why—maybe the holiday has become overshadowed by Christmas—maybe people didn’t send out enough Epiphany cards—or maybe the whole idea of celebrating how Jesus *reveals* God to the world just seems a little bit too...abstract.

Well, if you are among those who think that the whole idea behind Epiphany sounds kind of abstract—like I do—then you are in luck today. Because one of the most wonderful things about the Bible is the way that it can teach about abstract concepts like grace and hope—and “Epiphany”—through concrete, tangible stories. The stories of the Bible give flesh and bone to concepts of faith. Take today’s Scripture reading, for example, the story Jesus as a child and the visit of the wise men—that is a story that gives flesh and bone to this whole concept of “Jesus revealing God to the world”. Or in other words, it’s a story about Epiphany.

The story begins sometime shortly after Jesus’ birth, though nobody knows exactly how long after. A star suddenly *appears* to wise men in the East, and it is *revealed* to them (there’s that word “revealed”) that a new king has been born in Jerusalem. Right away they pack up gifts to offer the new child king and set out for Jerusalem. When they arrive and begin to ask where the new king is,

Herod, the current king of that area, all of the sudden begins to feel threatened. So he gathers the wise men to himself and tells them to reveal to him when and where they find the child, so that—he claimed—he could go and honor him too—though everybody knew that he really wanted to do Jesus harm. Well, eventually the wise men make it to Bethlehem, and a star leads them right to the place where Jesus is. They enter, kneel before the Christ child, offer him gold and frankincense and myrrh, and then hightail it right out of there on the back roads so that Herod can never find them to ask them where they've been. After all, Jesus' birth may have been a source of joy to the wise men, but they knew it was a threat to Herod—and they didn't want to do anything to put the child at risk.

Isn't it interesting how the same event—the same Epiphany—the same “revelation”—can result in such widely differently reactions from people? It's the same Epiphany that both the wise men and Herod receive—it's the same revelation that the Christ child is born. And yet, their reactions are so different. When the wise men receive the Epiphany, they are overjoyed, and rush to worship the baby. But when Herod receives it, he is terrified out of his mind, and eventually becomes paranoid. *One* Epiphany, but *two* responses. The Epiphany of Jesus' birth, it seems, can be a message both of “good news” and of “bad news”—a promise and a threat—a message of “disturbing good news”, we might call it. In fact, it may very well be that *anytime* God gives us an Epiphany—anytime God acts in our lives to “reveal” something about who God is, and who we are—it is always, from a certain perspective, a message of *disturbing* “good news”.

Now of course, it would be easy for us at this point to assure ourselves that we always respond to God's Epiphanies with the faith of the wise men, and never with the fear of Herod. That's probably how most of us would like to react. But the truth is, when faced with Epiphanies from God, I believe we all have the potential to be like the wise men, and we all have the potential to be scared like Herod too. For example, the good news may be that *Jesus* is Lord, but that news may make us feel threatened when we realize that *we* are *not*. The good news is that Jesus can change our lives, but that news may sound kind of scary when we realize that we really don't want our lives to change. The good news is that God—and only God—can offer us real security, but that news may make us feel vulnerable and open when we realize that that means we have to give up looking for security in other places like jobs and money and people and power. The good news is that Jesus can make brothers and sisters out of anybody, but that news may make us feel awfully uncomfortable when we come face-to-face with having to serve and embrace folks who are very different from us—or whom we don't think we like.

You see, ultimately what Epiphany is ultimately all about is giving us a clearer picture of who *God* is, and subsequently who *we* are. It is kind of like growing up: sometimes getting a clearer picture of things may hurt at first—it may seem like bad news at first—but ultimately it is what is *true*, and the truth shall set us free. The Epiphany of God in Jesus Christ is in the end an invitation to be really honest about who God is, and to be really honest about who we are:

beautiful but broken, sinners but saints, joyful but fearful, children who are loved passionately by a God who more than anything wants us to be the people we were created to be.

So the next time we feel loved by God, let us be thankful for it. And the next time we feel threatened and stretched and challenged by God, well let us be thankful for that too.

After all, sometimes God's call to us may sound like good news and sometimes it may sound like bad news. But it is always precisely what we need. And that is the best news of all, don't you think?

Thanks be to God. Amen.