

January 1, 2012
Rev. Shane Page
Myers Park United Methodist Church

So here it is in what seems a blink of the eye, Epiphany Sunday, that word Epiphany meaning “manifestation” or “appearance” as it relates to the one whose birth we celebrated last week. And, of course, the story every year on this Sunday we hear Matthew’s version of the birth of Christ, the main characters in this act being those elusive, enigmatic magi traveling from the East, following the star heralding Jesus’ birth.

It is, of course, a staple every year in every Christmas pageant in the church or anywhere else, having three youth decked out in robes of some kind – I wore a bathrobe, I recall – bringing with them the three gifts; and yet despite the humor and levity in these re-enactments, I am always struck by what seems to be the foreboding, dark feel of this narrative, as Herod and his minions loom large in the background with their sinister plot to annihilate the Christ child.

In my reading of the story this year I noticed, as if for the first time, the words of the third verse. Verse one begins with the wise men coming from the East, saying, presumably, to the residents of Jerusalem, “Where is he who is born the king of the Jews, for we are come to

worship him?" which we would think would elicit in the people a sense of excitement, a Messianic announcement such as this, the great longing of the people of Israel. In verse three, though, Matthew writes: "When Herod the king heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Interesting. They were troubled, Matthew says. The message of Christmas, according to our text, brought with it...trouble.

Now what a contradiction this seems to be. I drove into work on Christmas Eve and I had James Taylor serenading me in my car, right there on K 104.7, telling me to have myself a merry little Christmas; that from now on my troubles would be out of sight and miles away. He lied to me! For according to Matthew, when that first announcement of Christmas hit the streets of the Jerusalem, people said to one another not "Peace on earth and mercy mild but "Oh, we got trouble right here in the Holy City!"

I mean, Jesus is only a few weeks old, and in march a team of unorthodox pagans from a pagan land, probably having never read the Scriptures in their life (and never joined a church either), kneeling down in front of this Holy Infant, breaking who knows how many immigration laws in the process. Jesus can hardly even walk and already he has disregarded our systems of law and order. Now that's trouble!

Maybe that is why Herod and all of Jerusalem were so bent out of shape when the Magi came with those first Christmas greetings. It is how Herod got his job, after all. He told the Romans, "Look, you can depend on me. I'll make sure the people do your bidding. I'll keep the peace. Put me in office and I'll be your man, you'll see." He even had around him these aristocratic priests who would, in case things got out of hand with the populace, convince everybody that the status quo was really in everybody's best interests to uphold. "God wants it this way. It's better this way. Peace is achievable this way..."

Herod knew. The inhabitants of Jerusalem knew that if there is one thing the Messiah would never tolerate, it would be the way things are. And change is always trouble long before it is ever agreeable.

The Virgin Mary tried to warn them. The angel Gabriel had told her that she would give birth to the chosen one; that the Son of the Most High would proceed from her womb; and a few verses later Mary sings her first lullaby, saying, "The Almighty God has done great things for me. He has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty." One scholar said this is more than the language of praise and worship; it is the language of regime change, of the beginning of a revolution. Oh, we've got trouble down here in the Holy City.

Trouble, of course, would follow this child wherever he went later in life. Every year in the church, a certain gospel is the designated gospel for that particular year. Last year, we read from Matthew. This year it will be Mark's gospel. And what I love about Mark is that wherever Jesus goes, he kicks up the dust in the streets, leaving people reeling, their heads spinning, wondering. Almost every time Jesus opens his mouth in Mark's gospel the people say, "Who is this? We've never heard preaching like this before! He preaches like someone with authority."

Jesus marches into a synagogue in Mark chapter three, heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, on the day of worship, and for this little act, Mark says, the Pharisees and the Herod's sympathizers plotted how they might destroy him. They knew trouble when they saw it.

It is how politics work. We put people into power whom we believe can best protect our interests (or who can best convince us that their interests are really our interests as well). It's an election year now and every candidate on both sides – and you know this! – will do everything that can to convince us that a vote for him or for her will preserve our interests and our way of life.

And yet according to Matthew the message of Christmas – that troubling, vexing message of Christmas – is that Jesus is uninterested in preserving our way of life. Jesus

was born for the purpose of transformation, of turning this world upside down, of shaking our world to its very foundations and building something new amid its ruins instead.

He wrote the head pastor a letter after having visited his church for a while. The letter read: "Dear Pastor, I assume that you are accustomed to receiving complimentary letters. So this letter could be more of a complaint or a warning. It is intended to enlighten you as to how your actions and teachings related to Jesus have been destroying my life and the lives of others like me." He then explained how he was always a good, decent, hardworking man, someone who gave charity each year around Christmas. "Then," he writes, "I started attending your church, listened to your sermons, went to classes on Wednesday nights. I cannot believe what has happened to me. I used to avoid church. Now I come every Sunday. I used to avoid Christians who professed their faith. Now I am becoming one. I want you to know I've stopped saving for that flat-screen TV. I have reduced my 401(k) contributions. I have gone from saving as much money as I can to finding ways I can give much of it away. Just what has your church done to me? I lived the American dream, looked for security in the bottom line, but now I long for the God I cannot see. So I wanted you to be aware of the role you have played in destroying my life. I will be there in eternity to remind you of what you have done. Sincerely, your brother in Christ."

Now that's Christmas as it ought to be! The trouble Jesus brought with him during that night the Magi visited was really just another word for conversion. And the Magi got it. They went home, Matthew says, a different way, because when you get that close to Jesus, as those Magi did, you cannot help going in a different direction.

This is why I think the eternal Son of the Father in all his wisdom became a baby. If God became a prophet, we could ignore him. If he became another law, we could break it. If God became anything else, we could shut our ears, turn away, disregard. But a baby! You are stuck with a baby. A baby will take your old life and rip it to pieces. A baby will exhaust you, trouble you, and destroy your life – and bring you more joy than you thought possible.

Of course, the saddest part of this story concerns those scribes, those biblical scholars, those religious people, who had all that knowledge, all that divine insight, who were supposed to know the ways of God, who even pointed the Magi in the right direction, and made no motion themselves, staying right where they were, unmoved, unmotivated.

Saint Augustine said that this can happen to us. He warned that we churchgoers can get so accustomed to the liturgy – the hymns, the readings, the sermon, the

prayers – that we let these things get in the way of our coming to Jesus. Even though everything we do in here is somehow meant to point you in the right direction, to point you toward and to get you closer to Jesus, we can stay put, paying more attention to the signs instead of the One signified by the signs, missing Jesus.

Well, in deference to dear old Augustine, allow me to make it clear to all of us, the religious people in this story, the ones most in danger of staying put. Get closer. Don't be afraid. That child born in Bethlehem wants to make his home with you, to grow with you and in you until you no longer recognize the person you once were. This child is your only hope. Draw close to this child and I can promise you that you will go home another way. He'll turn your life upside down, change you, hassle you, nag you, and come at you until you become deep down someone who burns for God and who gets a little fed up with Herod's way of doing business.

It's a hard thing, growing with up with Jesus, but take it from anyone who has ever fallen down before him in praise and worship. He is worth all the trouble.