

A STORY NO ONE WOULD EXPECT

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Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

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.

You may have noticed that some of the figures are missing from the nativity scene this morning. There are no shepherds and no animals except for the camels. I put them away because they're from Luke, and we're not reading Luke today. We're reading Matthew.

Matthew doesn't have shepherds and sheep and cattle and all that. He mentions Jesus' birth, but he doesn't include the story. Instead he focuses on the wise men coming to see the baby Jesus, who actually would've been two or three months old by then because that's how long it would've taken them to go from most likely Persia in the East all the way to Palestine. (Notice in the reading that they enter a house, not a stable. Mary and Joseph have long since found more suitable accommodations.) And as far as the number of wise men goes, we assume there were three because that's how many gifts they brought, but the text doesn't actually say. It says wise men, so there were at least two. But for all we know, there could've been five or ten or twenty. There could've been a whole parade of wise men coming to see Jesus.

The point I'm trying to make is this: We think we know this story, but when we take a closer look, there are actually a lot of surprising things about it. And what's most surprising to me is how it takes a turn right in the middle. It starts out going in one direction, and then it goes in another. And when it does, it forces us to re-consider what the birth of Jesus is all about.

And to see what I mean, we have to understand where the story of the wise men comes from in the first place.

Matthew didn't just sit down one day and make up a story about gift-bearing wise men

coming from far away to see what God was up to. He got the basic plot and a lot of the imagery from Isaiah 60, which comes from a very dark time in Israel's past.

Back up several hundred years. The Israelites have finally been allowed to return to Jerusalem after being in exile for a long time. But when they get there, it's not much of a homecoming because what they find is a city in ruins. The walls are crumbling, the economy has collapsed, and nobody knows how to pick up the pieces and put them back together. Nobody knows how to turn this pile of rubble into a place where they can thrive again.

So along comes Isaiah, and he invites this broken, demoralized community to look up from the ashes and believe that they actually do have a bright future ahead of them, if they can only imagine it. "Arise, shine," he tells them, "for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you."

Then he describes all the things they have to look forward to. Jerusalem will come back stronger than ever. It'll be an economic powerhouse—a center of trade, buzzing with activity, just like it was long ago. Ships and caravans will come from all over, loaded with gold and luxuries like frankincense. "The abundance of the sea" and "the wealth of nations" will be brought to their doorstep, Isaiah says, and "a multitude of camels" will cover them. They'll be rich beyond belief, and people everywhere will see what God has done for them and "proclaim the praise of the Lord."

So look at what we've got here. We've got foreign travelers coming to Jerusalem from far away places, carrying items of enormous value and praising God for

delivering God's people from hopelessness and despair. Does any of that sound familiar? It should. Matthew takes all those elements and uses them to tell his own story about the coming of the Messiah during another dark time that's still ongoing in Matthew's day—the Roman occupation.

And by basing his story on Isaiah's, he creates an expectation in the minds of his readers. He creates the expectation that his story is going to go the same way. It's going to be a story about God lifting people out of the ashes, and restoring their status, and making them into a great and prosperous nation. But just when we think we know where Matthew is headed, he takes our expectation and tosses it out the window. He says, Surprise! This is actually a totally different story. This is a story no one would expect.

And the turn happens right after the wise men show up in Jerusalem.

One day King Herod hears a rumor about some travelers from the East who are going around town asking about a child who's been born "king of the Jews," and he doesn't like the sound of that. It makes him very uneasy. Herod is not a popular king. He has a reputation for cruelty, and a lot of people see him as a Roman puppet and question his legitimacy. So the last thing he needs is a potential rival, and immediately he starts working on a plan to eliminate the threat.

First he calls together all the priests and scribes and asks them where this child was born, and they quote him a passage from Micah 5, not Isaiah 60, about a ruler who will come from Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. When he hears that, Herod then summons the wise men and sends them on a little scouting mission. He tells them to go to

Bethlehem and look for Jesus and report back his location—supposedly so he can go and pay his respects, but really so he can have him murdered. So off they go, probably as surprised as we are that the king they're looking for is not in the capital, the center of power, but in a little dusty village down the road; and that he's not living in a palace but in an ordinary house; and that his parents aren't royalty but working class people.

So what we get is not at all what we're expecting. It's the opposite of what we're expecting. We're expecting a story about God lifting people out of the ashes, and restoring their status, and making them into a great and prosperous nation. What we get is a story about God being born into humble circumstances, as a helpless baby, who's life is in jeopardy. And the only thing that ends up saving him is something as flimsy as a dream. The wise men are warned in their sleep not to return to Herod, and when they wake up afterwards they sneak out of town and hightail it back to their home country, leaving Jesus safely anonymous—for now.

So why does Matthew do this? Why does he deliberately play with our expectations? Why does he set us up for a zig, and then zag? There are probably different answers to that question. But I think it's because he's trying to establish right here at the beginning of the gospel that God isn't tied down by the past. Just because God did one thing several hundred years ago doesn't mean God has to keep doing the same thing over and over. God is free to do a new thing whenever God chooses.

And I think we have the same freedom. I think that's what the birth of Jesus is about. I think God doesn't want us to be tied down by the past either—unable to let go of things, always stuck in the same old

patterns. I think God wants us to put our old selves behind us and start living a new life. But not many of us have the strength to do that on our own. So God helped us out. God came into our lives to show us what new life looks like, and to lead us to it, and to let us make the decision to claim it for ourselves.

And that's my prayer for all of us this morning—that in the coming year, we all discover our freedom and take hold of the new life in Christ and experience the peace and joy that it brings. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.