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Epiphany Sunday C
Peace, Seattle
January 6, 2013
Matt 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

As we flip calendars at the beginning of the year and look back at what's happened in our lives and in our world, it's a natural time for wondering what the coming year will bring.

I remember staying after class at Hawthorne Elementary School years ago (I won't tell you why I was staying after class…) learning how to clean the chalkboards so completely that not a single remnant of the day's lesson would remain.

There have been plenty of years I would've been quite content to wake on January 1st and find the dirty slate of my life from the old year wiped clean; and all my errors of judgment, unfinished projects, and worries scrubbed away. **Have you been there?**

We all yearn for new beginnings, both personally, and collectively, on a number of levels.

The season of Epiphany we begin today celebrates the power of God's light incarnate shining in our lives and in our world, and our texts during this season show us just how the God we see in Jesus will both keep darkness at bay and open for us and for all a new route, a new path, toward wholeness and peace.

Let's look at the gospel story today, and see if we can discover some clues about how God intends to bring his rule alive in the life of Jesus, and through Jesus, into our lives in the New Year.

The Epiphany story begins with the familiar and mysterious Magi, who have been led from their homes in the East by what they've seen in the stars, to seek a newborn king among the Jews.

This is one of those lean Bible stories that has spawned all kinds of creative additions.[1]

- For example, never does Matthew say there were only three Magi; but the three gifts laid at Christ's feet have tilted us toward that conclusion.
- Never does Matthew call them kings—that tradition probably comes from the association with Isaiah's prophecy—*"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."*
- Further, Matthew's story provides us with no names or country of origin for the star gazers; yet by the sixth century, tradition had declared them to be Melchior of Persia, Gaspar of India, and Balthazar of Arabia.[2]
- The meaning of the three gifts offered to Jesus has likewise been subject to much speculation and interpretation.

The hymn we sang a moment ago (yes, it's called *"We Three Kings")* suggests the **gold** is to be used for a king's crown; the **frankincense** as a worship offering; and the **myrrh** as an ointment for burial.

Each gift anticipates the trajectory the life of the young Jesus will take as he fulfills the destiny for which he came into the world.

[1] Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew.* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), p. 13.
[2] Robert H. Smith, *New Proclamation.* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 100.

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Theologian Karl Rahner offers another possibility. When the Magi laid their gifts before the child, he says,

> "They brought before the face of the invisible God now made visible the gold of their love, the incense of their reverence, and the myrrh of their suffering."[3]

There are many other interpretations as well, including one dear to many of us: Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.[4] We will never finish unwrapping the gifts of the original Magi. We can always find something new in them.[5]

But if in hearing this story we only dwell on the Magi and their gifts, then we've missed the larger message that Matthew is seeking to give us. That message comes in two parts.

(1) First, Mathew wants us to notice that it is outsiders, foreigners—men who are strangers both to the promised land and its religious tradition—who grasp the significance of this birth.

Responding to the outward sign and an inward call, these astrologers fulfill in their own day the prophecy Isaiah had uttered five centuries before:

> THE WEALTH OF THE NATIONS SHALL COME TO YOU. THEY SHALL BRING GOLD AND FRANKINCENSE AND SHALL PROCLAIM THE PRAISE OF LORD. (Isaiah 60:5,6)

What does this tell us about what God is up to? It tells us that there is something in this birth that transcends family and tribe; something that draws people together across the ancient boundaries of race and tribe and tongue.

Looking to what the New Year holds, the gospel asks: What **boundaries** around "my" family, "my" congregation, "my" territory, "my" possessions, does God invite me to reexamine or move beyond? And what **hedges** around my way of life must be trimmed—or breached altogether—in order for God's light to shine in clear and steady?

(2) The second central point of Matthew's story revolves around the identities not of the three kings but of two: Herod and Jesus.

Herod represents the old order, the old methods of dominion, the old way of doing and being king. The Christchild Jesus represents the new order, God's new order, not just one more king made with a better mold with fewer imperfections than all the others, but a complete overthrowing of the old order, a breaking of the old mold of kingship.

In Emmanuel God will use new ways and new means to accomplish God's mission;
ways that stand in deep contrast to the way the Herod's of the world go about their business.

Could this be why, at the tender age of two, this toddler king has old King Herod shaking in his boots?

History records that old King Herod sacrificed members of his own family in order to preserve his power. Violence as a method of statecraft and the slaughter of innocents who might stand in his way was not a problem for this king.

But in the reign of King Jesus, the proper use of power is expressed not in violent exploitation and desperate acts of self-preservation, but in self-emptying and self-giving love.

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[3] Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 105, cited in Robert Smith, op. cit., p. 101.
[4] *Amahl and the Night Visitors* is an opera in one act by Gian Carlo Menotti.
[5] Smith.

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When the Magi show up in Jerusalem making enquiries about "a child who has been born king of the Jews," it isn't long before Herod hears of it. And did you notice what Matthew says about this?

"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."

Which is to say, when homicidal Herod is scared, the whole city is put on pins and needles wondering what he might do next!

When Herod sees that the Magi themselves present no direct threat, his initial paranoia abates. **But what of this newborn child?** Why not let them complete their detective work, and if and when they find the child, then Herod will take care of the matter once and for all.

The Magi, of course, do find the Child. But Herod's plan, though foiled, leaves such searing sorrow in its wake that can hear—and have heard—its echoes even in our own day.

It's a dream, finally, that warns the emissaries not to reveal the whereabouts of the Child, and the Magi return home by "another way," never to be heard from again.

As we begin the New Year, God invites us to place our old methods, anxieties, paranoias, battles, like crude offerings, at the feet of Jesus, and to take up his cause, his methods, his way of living, so that we might reflect his light in the world.

Year 2013 is no blank slate. Chances are, the parts of our selves and our world we were eager to part with at the end of 2012 will not be suddenly cleaned up like a school chalkboard.

But because God resides with us in Jesus, there can be a new trajectory for our lives.

Transformation is never automatic, but it becomes possible when we found our hopes and place our trust in the One who came and pitched his tent among us.

"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it," St. John says, and because this is so, we enter the New Year with a renewed sense of hope for what this New Year might become with Christ as our light, our companion, our guide. Amen.