

Disruption and Peace

- [Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)
- [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Let's start with a quick survey -if you sent or received Christmas cards this year;

- Do you remember any with pictures of Mary and her baby?
- With pictures of the people sending the card?
- With pictures of shepherds and/or angels?
- With pictures of wise men and maybe camels?
- With pictures of the stable and everyone there including the shepherds and wise men?

I had a quick look through the cards we received and was interested to find only one card with wise men on it, but they were dressed as nutcrackers so I'm not sure that counts. Of course, most of the cards were lovely but not religious scenes at all.

In past years, I remember many pictures of three people in lovely clothes maybe mounted on camels, bringing exotic looking gifts. Those pictures were loosely based on today's gospel - the story of the magi, also known as the three kings or wisemen. In the church's year, they are not going to make it to Bethlehem until Thursday, which is the Feast of the Epiphany, ten days after Christmas Day, so our wise men are still travelling.

Did you notice in the reading that they when they finally got to Bethlehem they found Mary and the baby in a house not a stable? Magi actually have no place in the creche with the shepherds, angels and various critters.

We usually explain that the wise men came later, that it took a while to follow the star, especially if the star first showed up the night Jesus was

born. But the truth is that the story of the wise men coming to the house is a totally different story from that of the shepherds coming to the stable. Although Luke and Matthew both used Mark's gospel and some other source known as Q, there is a quite a lot in their gospels which is different from each other, and one of the big differences is the birth narratives.

It maybe that by the time they were writing there were a couple of different oral traditions, or it may be that they both wrote what they thought should have happened. Whichever it is, on Christmas we heard the story that Luke told with angels and shepherds and a babe wrapped in bands of cloth laid in a manger. Today we hear Matthew's version. In Matthew, the baby is heralded as the Messiah not by angels but by Herod himself.

The magi show up in Jerusalem and ask where the baby is who is born to be King of the Jews. Herod, who considers himself to be King of the Jews, doesn't know. There is no baby in his palace. So he asks the religious leaders – he asks them where the Messiah, the Christ, is to be born. Within the story, it is Herod who makes the connection between this baby and the Messiah, and as you know, he is not pleased.

What a contrast with Luke's story. There it was the common folk, people on the edge of society who first proclaimed Jesus as Christ. Here it is the ruler, and the highest ranks in society. We heard that King Herod was frightened and all of Jerusalem with him. That's like saying that all of Washington DC was worried – of course it's an exaggeration but Matthew is telling us what a big deal this was – not only was Herod personally frightened but the whole of the ruling class was threatened. This is not a sweet apolitical story about foreigners in lovely clothes bringing exotic gifts. This is highly political.

The birth of this baby, the birth of the Messiah, threatened everything that Herod and his court stood for. So much so that Herod plotted to kill the child and when he was thwarted by the magis' decision not to report back to him, he went ahead and had all the small boys in that town killed. Fortunately Joseph was warned in a dream and he took his family away before the soldiers arrived.

There are echoes here of Pharaoh decreeing that all Israelite boys should be killed at birth, but Moses was saved. In the big picture of Christian scripture, Moses may be seen a forerunner for the Christ – he was saved from untimely death, became an Egyptian prince then a fugitive and made his living as a shepherd before he was called to bring the people out of Egypt. The story of the Exodus is, of course, the founding narrative of the Hebrew people and it continues to be our spiritual narrative that we have been brought out of bondage to sin into the light of the new creation. It seems that Matthew is quite intentionally but subtly placing Jesus in the spiritual heritage of Moses. And just in case we don't get it, we are told that after the magi left, Joseph took Jesus and Mary to *Egypt* for safety.

So by the end of his birth narrative, Matthew has deftly told us that Jesus is a threat to secular authority just as Moses was a threat to Pharaoh. Yet Moses was ultimately successful in freeing his people, as Jesus will be.

Herod's attempt to kill Jesus comes full circle in the crucifixion when Jesus is brutally killed by the Romans acting together with one of Herod's sons. Killed because he is a threat to the system of power and oppression. But remember, Moses brought the people out of bondage - Jesus too is the Savior who brings his people out of Egypt.

We, the people of God, are the ones who are led out of bondage.

The first reading this morning was taken from Jeremiah as he prophesied to people being taken into exile, that there will be a return. *God

promised, “I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble...”

That is God’s promise. It is as true now as it was then. Exile happens but God promises return, not just for the young and fit but for all kinds of people.

We are constantly having experiences of exile and loss; we are also constantly being led out of exile and loss into the promised land where we can live every moment aware of the presence of God. It may feel like a hamster wheel of exile and return, exile and return but there is forward movement. And in that is our hope.

Jesus disrupts business as usual. Jesus creates disturbance. Every time we experience an epiphany in our lives, Jerusalem becomes frightened and starts to fight back, trying to kill every sign of new life. But Jesus always wins. We are the people of the resurrection, we are the ones who know that God’s life never dies – the remnant of the people will return with yes, weeping, but also with joy.

And as the people who know exile and also return, who follow the Christ who disrupts Jerusalem, we get to fight oppression with courage knowing that life always conquers, love always wins.

You don’t need me to remind you that those of us sitting here are privileged. Yes, we can identify with the shepherds, but we are also the well-educated, the astronomers and astrologers. We are the people of Jerusalem whose lives are disrupted by the Christ child rising within us and among us as the new light.

We don't want disruption, we want everything to stay comfortably predictable. But our God is a God who breaks into business as usual, our God is a God who brings both discomfort and peace. The trick is to live with both; to find the peace of God's unconditional love in the disruption of our lives, because it is the Christ who brings peace and the Christ who brings disruption.