

St. David's Presbyterian Church - January 8, 2012  
Epiphany – Matthew 2:1-23; Rev. Dawn Griffiths

Friday was Epiphany, the day the Church celebrates the magi finding the Christ child. Today, Epiphany Sunday, marks the end of the official Christmas season for the church, so I thought it appropriate that we read the end of the Xmas story today.

Matthew chapter 2:13-23 is the end of the Christmas story, but we don't often read the end of the story. If you follow a published daily Bible reading schedule, it probably doesn't include the last part of chapter 2. Even the revised common lectionary leaves out the part after the visit of the magi... it ends at verse 12. According to those who compile the lectionary, it seems that clergy aren't expected to preach on that part of the story... After all, it's not a nice story is it?

It would be much nicer to stay with the idyllic picture of a silent night, a star, a stable and a holy child adored by shepherds and wisemen....

But Matthew doesn't end the story there because what happened next is too important to leave out. Without verses 13-23 the story sounds almost too good to be true. Matthew shatters the idyllic picture of a silent night with the cries of grieving parents, the blood of babies and the flight of a refugee family.

The Christmas story isn't a fairy tale which ends with a Christmas card picture of a contented infant cradled by loving parents, surrounded by adoring shepherds, angels and wisemen, and the final words 'and they all lived happily ever after'...

Oh, that would be a lovely story....

But that's all it would be... a story. And Matthew knew that we need more than a lovely story. We need to know that Christmas makes a difference for our world, not only in the good times, but in the difficult and scary and trying times of our lives. That's what Matthew begins to tell us in verse 13.

He tells us that although Christ came into the world bringing gifts of peace and light, that's not the end of the story because not everyone wants peace and light.

We just have to watch the news to see the truth of that in our own time, don't we? It's perfectly clear that there are those who don't want peace. There are those who want to cause as much damage as possible to the most people possible, sometimes even to people they don't know, people who've done nothing to harm them. The most obvious are terrorist attacks like 9/11; or suicide bombers. But there have always been people who want to hurt others, to destroy lives and property, to cause pain.

There are those who don't want God in control of their lives. They want money or fame or

power or thrills or whatever, and it doesn't matter who gets hurt in the process. We've seen many examples recently of dictators willing to terrorize, injure and kill their own people in order to maintain power. We've seen it in Egypt, Libya, Syria; the list goes on...

John in **his** gospel described the same reality in a less graphic way. He tells us that Jesus Christ came into the world as light; but some people prefer the dark.

Herod was one of those people who prefer the dark. He felt threatened by Jesus, so he tried to kill him. Secular history tells us that by some standards Herod was a great king. He ruled a difficult region for many years and earned the respect of the Roman authorities. He was very rich. He was very powerful. By many of the world's standards he was a success...

But his success came at the cost of many lives. Anyone who was perceived as a threat to him was killed. The Bible tells us about the killing of the infant boys in Bethlehem. Secular history books tell us these weren't the only victims by far... There was his mother-in-law Alexandra, his wife Miriamne, his eldest son, Antipater, two of his younger sons Alexander and Aristobulus, and literally thousands of others.

There have been many people over the years who, like Herod, have rejected God and chosen the darkness. Lately the news has been full of them.

But the good news is that the darkness has not won! It cannot win!!

Because Christ came that night in Bethlehem; because God came as a child into the world, there is light.

We can choose God. We can choose the Light. We can claim the promises of Christmas and live in the light no matter what darkness surrounds us. That is the message Matthew wants us to grasp by writing chapter 2:13-23.

He shows us what happens when we follow the Light even in the midst of the darkness; when we welcome the coming of God into the world and into our lives. As John put it so beautifully in his gospel, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it!' (John 1:5)

Matthew tells us the same wonderful truth in the stories of the wisemen and of Joseph. He assures us that even with the darkness all around us, we, like the wisemen can find God. Even in the midst of danger and trouble, we, like Joseph, can trust God to lead us through the darkness and the unknown into safety and light....

The magi were from the region of Persia. They were scholars, skilled in medicine, science and philosophy; men who sought truth and especially religious truth. They weren't Jews, didn't know the Jewish scriptures or prophecies, but they were looking for Truth. When they saw the star heralding the birth of the new king of the Jews they recognized God's leading and set out to find the child of promise.

They weren't sure exactly what they would find; but they didn't give up. They kept following the star. It took them months – some scholars think as much as two years – but they didn't give up; they persevered, and eventually they found the Christ child. And when they found him, they recognized the child was much more than a king! They fell down and worshipped him.

They realized they were in the presence of God.

Having met God, they recognized his leading in their dreams,

They listened to God's leading and didn't go back to see Herod as they'd planned...

Their lives were changed, and they returned home rejoicing....

Have you ever thought about the fact that the star they followed was visible to anyone, but most people ignored it? If we're not looking for God, we'll miss the signs of God's presence which are all around us. If, like the wisemen, we truly want to find God, we can learn from them.

God promises "Those who seek me will find me when they seek me with all their hearts" (Deut 4:29)

The light of Christ's love reaches out to us, leading us closer and closer to Him.

The other person Matthew tells us about in chapter 2 is Joseph. Joseph was certainly facing the darkness and the unknown that first Christmas. It must have been frightening for him. Newly married, responsible for the care of an infant and new mother, no place to live, little money, no family or community support; and just when they found a house and things were settling down came the threat to his family from the mighty Herod who had spies and soldiers everywhere...

But Joseph knew that the Light of God was stronger than the darkness. Joseph trusted God. He trusted God's leading, even when it meant travelling through the desert with a newborn; even when it meant leaving home to live in a foreign country.

Matthew doesn't tell us the details of what happened during their exile in Egypt, but we do know that the family was healthy and grew, and that they continued to trust in God's care and leading. We know Joseph trusted God's leading to bring them back to Judea at the right time, to live in Nazareth so God's plan could mature.

Matthew isn't trying to depress us with his stories Herod's treachery; of murdered children and a refugee family.

Matthew is reassuring us that the Light of God that came into the world in Bethlehem is stronger than any darkness! He is reassuring us that God is found by those who seek him,

That God leads those who will follow in safe paths.

Matthew is showing us that the promises of Christmas are true. He shows us that God is with us, just as he led the magi to the presence of God; just as he led the little family out of danger, God will guide and lead us through the darkness and the unknown if we will only choose to

follow.

The fact that many people continue to choose the darkness doesn't mean God has left us on our own.

All those who seek him, will find him. He will lead everyone who turns to him for guidance. His presence and love, His peace, joy and hope are gifts for the taking.

The Christmas story didn't end in the stable, it continues! That's a message to carry with us as we face this new year, with all of its unknowns, fears and darkness.

There are still people in our world who, like Herod, choose the darkness.

But for those who welcome Emmanuel, for those who seek God and his leading in their lives, the message is clear and wonderful.

Don't be afraid! God loves you. God is here for you. God will lead you into the light.

In his year end address in 1939, that's the message King George VI gave to the people of Britain and the Empire as the darkness of WW2 cast a shadow over the coming year.

In his speech he quoted these lines;

'I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year; "Give me a lamp that I may tread safely into the unknown." He replied; "Put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than the known way"'.

As we walk through the gate of the year 2012 there is no better advice.

When we grasp the hand of God we are led into God's Light and Love that no darkness can withstand. This year may we all walk in the Light of God.

Amen