



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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"Epiphany: A Three Dimensional Story"

Sermon preached at the six o'clock pm service, January 6, 2016

The Epiphany—Based on Matthew 2: 1-12

This is the day of the Wise Men Story. There really are two stories, and we're not sure about the identity and gender of the visitors from the East. I suppose it's best to refer to them as "Magi."

If these stories were made into movies, one would be rated "G" and the other "R."

The G-rated Magi story is the one didactically told by guileless clergy to sleepy congregations after the holidays. It's core content is in the Gospel of Luke. You know the story: Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the animals and the angels. Everything connected with the birth of Jesus was exclusively tied to one people; in Luke's recording, everything was serene. And, connected to the Lucan story are Christmas pleasantries: Music boxes, tea and shortcake, tinsel, eggnog and fruitcake, Currier and Ives, dresses with bows, sleigh rides, Norman Rockwell and It's a Wonderful Life.

The other Magi story would be rated "R" — R for violence, and it's told by Matthew. Exit the sweet and serene stable, enter Herod's palace; exit the shepherds, enter the Magi; exit angels singing on high, enter Herod; exit Mary and Joseph, enter Rachel; close the music boxes playing lullabies, enter the screams of the innocent: "I heard a voice in Ramah. It was Rachel weeping for her children."

Here is the actual scenario: In the days of Herod the King, the Magi came into his court and asked "Where is the King?" ... not you who sits on the throne of this corner of the Mighty Roman Empire, but the One is born to reign? You know exactly what Herod was feeling. The RSV says, "Herod was troubled." That's one of those biblical understatements. inwardly he was shaken to the core. outwardly he inquired as to the time and place of the birth. Then he made a secret pact with the Magi who, if they went along, would hand the baby over to Herod. The Magi might have done just that if they hadn't been warned in a dream persuading them to return by another way.

When the Magi didn't return, Herod's blood-thirsty rage erupted, and he ordered every little baby boy in and around Bethlehem to be murdered... and so they were.

The baby Jesus escaped only because his parents fled to Egypt.

The authentic Magi story is not for general viewing. Jesus comes into the world born to reign, and anyone with any sovereignty over anything has the Herod potential to drastic action to keep Jesus from their domain. That is the R-rated truth of the Matthean version of the Magi story.

Epiphany is three-dimensional.

First, God's Incarnation — God coming into the world in the person of Jesus -- has something to do with race, class, culture, gender, and orientation, and the truth that all people are equally under the light of Christ. Epiphany has something to do with Brown v. Board of Education; Wounded Knee; and, the Stonewall Riots. It has something to

do with the treatment of marginalized people. Epiphany has something to do with inclusion and radical hospitality. The interracial and transcultural manger reminds us of God's kind of unity.

The second dimension of the Epiphany story has to do with competition that will dog Christ every place in the world. Whose possession is this world? Who is sovereign? There is a Herod-like darkness deep inside people which cries out: "It's mine! It's mine!" Each of us is king or queen over something, yet someone is born to reign. That is the question asked in one way or another in Syria, in Palestine, in Haiti, and in the shadows of every soul here as we clutch to secure the hard-won sovereignty we have over our lives. Christ is born to reign ... will we let him?

The third dimension of the story is that a light begins to shine which will never be extinguished. The light comes from a life, a life lived in first century Palestine, but its light still warms us. That light which was buried just outside of Jerusalem, yet its light still burns just off of Park Avenue in Manhattan.

Carl Spitz was a missionary in Haiti. They used to call them agricultural missions. He was a gardener who loved God ... and loved all kinds of people, especially the Haitians.

He taught local villagers how to grow high-vitamin content vegetables and raise livestock. He taught them stories from the Bible. He translated some of their great folk tales into their language, Creole. He adopted two Haitian girls who were found in a trash can.

The Ton-ton Macoute — the official hit-men of Papa and Baby Doc Duvalier came to Carl and said, "you're under arrest." They deemed him dangerous. Well, in a way he was. He was dangerous for Papa and Baby Doc's reign because he didn't know how to just love their kind. He loved everyone. He should have known you've got to watch out who you love; if you love the wrong people, you could be deemed dangerous.

All the Magi said was, "Where is he, we want to honor and worship him." All we want to do is have a worship service and extend our honor and love, and trouble broke out. They weren't revolutionaries. They didn't carry weapons. They didn't paint signs and march around Bethlehem. All they said was, "we want to worship him."

John's gospel says it this way:

"This is the crisis of the world, that light has come into the world and people love the darkness. The time will come when they'll drag you out of the synagogues and they'll kill you in the name of God ... In the name of God, they'll kill you, and say 'Amen.' "

In the heaviness of exclusivism that light shines with a confidence that all are invited to be with Christ. In all our striving for sovereignty, that light shines with an assurance of belonging and participation. As Jesus said years later as a grown man: "I am the light of the world; he or she who follows will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

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