

Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

All throughout Advent and Christmas, we have been concerned with the story of the anticipation and fulfillment of prophecy in the coming of the Messiah. Isaiah has proclaimed loudly that salvation is coming thanks to God's mighty arm, that justice is coming, and that our salvation will be beautiful, and comforting, and it will be like coming home again after being set free from a long and oppressive slavery.

And then the utter shock that that fulfillment came in the form of a human baby born to a young and unwed mother in a stable surrounded by animals. The shock that God comes to us as one of us, as one of the least of us, really, in stature and in the class structure. The shock that God breaks through the heavens and comes to us to live among us, to live with us, to live for us, beginning as a little tiny child with no place to lay his head.

Everyone is amazed. "How can this be?" Mary asks, speaking for all of us. How can this be?

And everyone is somewhat fearful. What can this mean? People were afraid to come too near God and too near God's messengers - conventional wisdom said that if you looked upon God, you would die. You would not be able to withstand being in God's presence - not because God means to hurt us but because of the vast difference between humanity and divinity. Frail humanity would wither away in the presence of the awesome Almighty God the way ice melts on a hot sidewalk.

But "Fear not, Mary," says the Angel. "Joseph, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife," says the Angel. Don't be afraid, shepherds, at the sight of a chorus of winged messengers in the sky but go and see for yourself what has happened, for to you, for you, the savior has come. And the wide gap between divine and human has been bridged.

And so the story has been filled with surprise, and the response has been tinged with fear. And there have been many words of gentle reassurance.

But today come the wise ones, the Magi, astrologers or Zoroastrians or jugglers or kings or fools - whatever they were, they come from far away, bearing symbolic gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

And they are neither fearful nor surprised. Rather than being shocked and amazed about the baby, they are expressly looking for a baby! "Where is *this child* who has been born?" they ask. Not, "OK, where is the king? Oh, wow, look it's a baby!"

They were looking for a baby. And when they found him, they were not at all surprised about his age or his class or his living arrangements. They were overwhelmed with joy

and they fell to their knees and opened their treasure boxes. They found what they were looking for. And their response was overwhelming joy and generosity.

Maybe this is why we call them wise men.

Contrast the reaction of King Herod, the Empire's man in the capital city. He and all of Jerusalem were filled with fear at the news the Magi brought. His response was to hold himself apart, suspicious, jealous, murderous even in his extreme fear brought on by the news of this child. He cared deeply for his power and his influence - his job and all the stuff that comes with it - and he was terrified at the prospect of someone taking any of it away from him. And so his response was to plot murder.

It's easy to see this contrast and think, well, duh, be like the Wise Men and not like Herod and all of Jerusalem!

But I suspect most of us are more familiar with fear than we are with joy. We are more acquainted with the feeling of squeezing our hands shut than loosening our grip on our treasure chests. We know that physical sensation that comes from deep inside when we are afraid of losing what we have. We are often not sure what we are looking for but definitely sure that we don't want to find that it's about somebody else.

Joy seems like a luxury, something for children or at least the child-like, those who are not burdened with the fears that creep around the edges of our lives, waiting to pounce. Joy seems imprudent, often, and even inappropriate. How can we play our harps and sing songs of Zion when we are in captivity in Babylon? How can we rejoice when there is so much grief and so much pain and so much death and so much anxiety and so little certainty? How can we be generous when we don't know if there's going to be enough for us?

We may not plot murder, but we are well acquainted with fear.

But look at what fear does. It makes us suspicious. It makes us stingy. It makes us hold ourselves apart. It makes us mean.

And it makes us unable to experience real joy. The kind of joy that overwhelms, as scary as that prospect might seem, being overwhelmed, which might feel like being out of control. But joy is a gift from God and not something to be afraid of. Good tidings of great joy, the angels said. Joy, joy, joy, goes the Christmas hymn. Joy is also a feeling that comes from deep inside, and it leads not to clenched hands but to open treasure chests. It leads to generosity and it leads to life.

Think of the scene in the 1951 movie of Dickens' Christmas Carol when Ebenezer Scrooge, masterfully played by Alastair Sim, wakes on Christmas morning to find that he is alive and still has time to send a fat turkey to the Cratchett household, to give his housekeeper a raise, to reconcile with his nephew, to live his life in the joy of the knowledge of his salvation. His whole being has changed, his face, his body, his

outlook. He giggles, he dances, he is overwhelmed by joy and he opens his famously tight fists and casts his treasure before a little child.

He is overwhelmed by joy.

The wonderful poet Mary Oliver has this to say about joy even in the face of the angst and loss in our lives in her prose poem "Don't Hesitate" -

She says, "If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still, life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb."

Joy is not made to be a crumb.

The Rev. Penny A. Nash
The Feast of the Epiphany
Bruton Parish Church
January 8, 2012