

EPIPHANY
Matthew 2:1-11
Boring?

Wow, what a surprise. Same old stuff again, over and over and over. Stand, sit, stand, sit, stand, sit. I think they only have us stand to make sure we're still alive. I thought Pastor was asthmatic. Where's all the hot air come from? Oh, look, a baby. Good, I can make faces instead of paying attention. Ha, the old guy's sleeping again. Bet he doesn't stand up after the sermon. Better poke my friend to make sure he doesn't miss it.

Uh oh, time to stand up. Whew, almost missed the cue. Going through the motions, you know. Hah! That old man *is* still sleeping. Classic! All right, back to the hymnal. I know it by heart, but I like to keep my nose in the book anyways. Otherwise, God might think I cared. I know all this means something, but I forgot what that is and I feel dumb asking. Better to stay dumb than look dumb, I always say. Uh oh, offering plate. Better put something in. Don't want to look cheap. Time for Communion. Might as well go up. Otherwise I just sit here and sing the hymns.

Pretty boring, isn't it all? No, you're boring. It is the most amazing stuff in all the world. If you stare at it like a cow at a new fence, whose fault is that? Christ is here, wrapped in the swaddling clothes of Scripture, resting, flesh and blood, in the manger of the altar, cooing and gurgling from the font. The Father is here, beaming with pride at the Offspring of His love, made Man to bring you into His family. The Spirit is here, moving shepherd and magi, simple and wise, to see in this Child a King, and not only a King, but the King. Plain, sure. Unassuming, sure. But boring, no way.

If it takes theatre seats, tambourines, or television screens to get you excited for that, you have bigger worries than boredom, and, should those things stir you, it is not faith getting your gut all aflutter, but the same stuff that puts your heart a patter when you watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Why did Christ have to go and be born in a plain old manger in a plain old town? Why couldn't the greatest story ever told also be the greatest show? How are we supposed to stay awake in this barn Christ has made His Church? Faith doesn't ask such questions. Faith kneels and ponders.

Herod knew where to look to find the King. He put his scholar's noses into the Book. It didn't take long. It wasn't hard work. The Book is about Him. Who, what, when, where, how: all in the Book. A little fuzzy at spots, sure, but not anymore. The Christ-child made it clear as day. It was a no-brainer. Herod had the Book. The Jews had the Book: the very mind of God inked in papyrus. But old news. Blah. Same old. God in His mercy even sent them Persians to proclaim the message anew, but an old man must have been sleeping or a baby must have made a cute face.

Herod and the Jews knew where the King was. They knew how to get there. That wasn't the problem. They just didn't want to go. And why should they? Why should this Beggar-King who couldn't even find a room in the inn find a home in their hearts? But the gospel doesn't persuade; it promises. Christ isn't marketed. He's manged. Salvation isn't crafted. It's born. The star disappeared when the Scriptures were opened, a lesser star blocked by a greater star, and only reappeared when the Magi continued their journey in obedience to what had been written. The Jews heard the sound of the gospel, but not the melody (Luther), and so they could not keep step and lost their way.

Jump in the wise men's heads. They'd gone to Jerusalem to find the newborn King of the Jews. It was the political capital, with the king's palace, and the spiritual capital, with God's temple. Surely, this is where the Christ would be. Nope. He was in some backwoods hick town, like looking for the Savior in Michigan just to learn He'd been born among the yokels in Ohio.

They'd expected the Jews to be excited at the regal birth of a King so special that a spectacular star would proclaim Him all the way in Persia. Surely the city would be all astir. Nope. Business as usual, the only chatter of fear and not of hope, of Herod's wrath and not Jesus' mercy. The temple services continued. People still gave their offerings. The Word was still proclaimed, but to what end?

And so what should these wise men have done? Returned to Persia in disappointment, having come all this way for nothing? Isn't that what we'd do? But what do they do? They keep pressing on. If Bethlehem is where Christ is, then Bethlehem is where they want to be. Even more, now they had, not only a star, but the very Word of God to lead them! These scholars knew the value of a primary source, an historical record, a prediction fastidiously made and time and again confirmed with signs and wonders. They press on. Nothing boring about any of this to them. Plain, sure. Unassuming, sure. But boring, no way.

You know something interesting about major battles? They rarely, if ever, are fought in the capital or even a major metropolitan area. Major battles are most often fought in the middle of nowhere, as the greatest of men in the humblest of circumstances accomplish the mightiest of deeds. Why then should the opening round of the most significant battle of human history of the greatest Man with the most menacing of foes be any different? Bethlehem, a cattle shed, a manger it is.

Herod was an intimidating king. He'd bathed himself in the blood of his enemies. Augustus said that he'd rather be Herod's pig than his son. Herod killed a handful of his sons, a wife, several other relatives, and, the hardest to believe, even his mother-in-law—all perceived threats to his power. The wise men's good news of glad tidings was a death sentence for the Christ-child. Why shouldn't he who butchered even his own blood not also dampen Bethlehem's soil with the blood of this Rival in Bethlehem? And he tried, ordering what we now commemorate in the Church Year as the slaughter of the Holy Innocents. But Herod, terrible as he was, was not the most menacing foe.

Christ was no threat to Herod. As He Pilate learned, Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. He came to quell the foes that besiege your conscience, wrinkle your skin, and fill your ears with false christs and twisted promises, the foes that plague you with guilt or keep you from blushing—whichever is easier—that drag you down into the grave and seek to extend that descent into hell.

Here, robed in Word and Sacrament, is your King, infant though He be, come out of eternity into time to bring you out of time and into eternity (Gerhard). Here is your deliverance. Wise men come from the east of paradise lost to welcome paradise gained: gentiles, foreigners, welcomed into Israel to worship this King who fights, not local enemies, but universal ones. They bring gold for the Treasure of heaven, frankincense for true God of true God, and myrrh, burial perfume, for the One born to die that we might be born again. They come to Bethlehem to find the divine dressed in humanity, like a diamond wrapped in newspaper or filet mignon on a Styrofoam plate, given and served up for us from heaven.

Boring? Are you kidding me? Let us follow the magi, leaving behind all that would keep us from Bethlehem, and bask in the Sun of Righteousness (Chrysostom). Sit to hear your King. Stand to speak to Him. Kneel to receive Him into the humble habitation of your heart. Confess, receive, sing, adore, listen, receive, confess, sing, eat, drink, depart with blessing. You've not walked a thousand miles. Merely open eyes, ears, and mouths. If you want to make faces at a baby, it's your lucky day. Make a grateful face at this Christ-child.

Herod and his scholars had their noses in the Word, but not their hearts. May it never be so among us! Noses, eyes, ears, hearts: let our whole being be where Christ is, where forgiveness is, where life is, where heaven is, even if He's wrapped in the swaddling clothes of Scripture, resting, flesh and blood, in the manger of the altar, cooing and gurgling from the font. Plain, sure. Unassuming, sure. But boring, no way! Amen.