



NORTHMINSTER CHURCH

DO JUSTICE, LOVE MERCY, WALK
HUMBLY WITH GOD. MICAH 6:8

An Epiphany Story

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Matthew 2:1-23

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2:1 After Jesus' birth—which happened in Bethlehem of Judea, during the reign of Herod—astrologers from the East arrived in Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the newborn ruler of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay homage." 3 At this news Herod became greatly disturbed, as did all of Jerusalem. 4 Summoning all the chief priests and religious scholars of the people, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem of Judea," they informed him. "Here is what the prophet has written: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, since from you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed them, "Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report back to me—so that I may go and offer homage, too." 9 After their audience with the ruler, they set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child lay. 10 They were overjoyed at seeing the star and, 11 upon entering the house, found the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and paid homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

12 They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route.

13 After the astrologers had left, the angel of God suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph with the command, "Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you otherwise. Herod is searching for the child to destroy him." 14 Joseph got up, awakened Jesus and Mary, and they left that night for Egypt. 15 They stayed there until the death of Herod, to fulfill what God had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I have called my Own."

16 Herod became furious when he realized that the astrologers had outwitted him. He gave orders to kill all male children that were two years old and younger living in and around Bethlehem. The age of the children was based on the date Herod had learned from the astrologers. 17 Then what was spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: 18

"A voice was heard in Ramah
sobbing and lamenting loudly:
it was Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
for they were no more."

19 After Herod's death, the angel of God appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 with the command, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and set out for the land of Israel. Those who had designs on the life of the child are dead." 21 Joseph got up, awakened Jesus and Mary, and they returned to the land of Israel. 22 Joseph heard, however, that Archelaus had succeeded Herod as ruler of Judea, and Joseph was afraid to go back there. Instead, because of a warning received by Joseph in a dream, the family went to the region of Galilee. 23 There they settled in a town called Nazareth. In this way, what was said through the prophets was fulfilled: "He will be called a Nazarene."

Joseph's eyes opened and his breath caught. The room was filled with the kind of thick darkness and silence only felt just before dawn. He closed his eyes again and laid still as feeling, not quite a memory, faded from his mind. He tried to grasp it, but it was fading away with the night. Letting out a long sigh, he gave up the weak struggle. Slowly and quietly, he sat up and his eyes adjusted. He could make out the shapes of his wife still sleeping, and their toddler on his mat across the room. Joseph crept outside, steeling himself against the dry chill of the desert. He was uneasy. The lost dream still weighed on him, though he no longer knew why. He felt like something was coming, something that would once again uproot and upend their already unstable lives. As the first glow of dawn began illuminating their camp, Joseph let out a whispered prayer. "Oh Lord, help us." He heard his son begin to stir, and knew a new day was beginning whether he was ready for it or not.

At that same moment, one hundred miles away in Jerusalem, three road-worn pilgrims approached the groggy watchmen at Herod's gate.

It was nearly two years ago when Balthasar of Arabia had first noticed the shockwave cascade across the cosmos. In his deepest prayers and trances, he felt that something new had opened into his world, like a door into another life had swung open and was flooding this one with fresh air. It felt as heavy and irreversible as the turning of an age. His brethren felt the same thing. They too heard the music of the spheres reach a new crescendo, and so they dove into their astrological studies to find the source of this celestial shift. It was Balthasar who found it, the new and irregular star beckoning them west, and after a conference with his eager peers, he was commissioned to follow its invitation. He was equipped with an offering of gold for whatever benevolent power was behind this.

After months on the perfidious western road, Balthasar crossed paths with two others who appeared to be moving in the same direction with the same purpose. They called themselves Melchior of Persia and Caspar of India, and each, through their own craft and religion, had learned of the shift and the star in their own way. As they spoke along the way, each contributed something from their own insight that the others had not seen. From the bookish but devout Caspar, they learned that the shift was to be attributed to a new ruler, and based on the direction of the star, it was a new ruler of the nation of people known as the Jews. From the mystic traditions of Melchior, who was not given to much speech, they learned that this ruler was not like the other kings of the world, but was rather a sort of paradox – powerlessly powerful. This contribution became a kōan on which the three would meditate for long stretches of road between conversation. The three energized one another as they left their worlds behind to find

the one who had opened a new chapter in cosmic history. They looked forward to joining these Jews in the celebration of their newborn king.

Now they stood at the gate, addressing two suspicious watchmen at the end of a long shift. "My good brothers," Balthasar led in an accent the watchmen had never heard before, "we are travelers from the east: astrologers, mystics, and scholars. We seek to pay homage to your new ruler, the anointed one born to the Jews." The watchmen, who had been listening skeptically, went white at these last words. Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior felt the energy shift and realized at once they had made a misjudgment of some kind. The watchmen, glancing at one another nervously, spoke with false bravado. "You will follow us, and you will not speak until you've been granted an audience with Herod, do you understand?" Now more guarded with their speech, the travelers acquiesced and followed.

They wove through Jerusalem as it awoke, windows and door opening to reveal faces that quickly turned suspicious of the strangers in their street. Other guards, oddly dressed and clearly not Jewish, looked with bored disinterest, though their presence seemed to make the watchmen leading them clench their jaws. Eventually, the group entered a gaudy palace and one of the watchmen conferred with a palace guard, who marched off through a door. The travelers barely had time to study the room when the guard re-emerged mechanically and stood at attention. The other guards in the room stood up straighter as a large and commanding man made his entrance. Balthasar surmised that this man must be Herod, and by his walk deduced that he was in charge here, or at least considered himself to be. Balthasar could also see, however, by the way Herod adjusted his robes, that he was disturbed and trying to maintain his composure.

Herod approached and spoke first with an air of false pleasantries. "My esteemed guests," he puffed, showing all of his teeth, "My captain of the guard has informed me that you are inquiring about a newborn ruler of the Jews. Please, tell me where you have come from and what it is you seek." He looked expectantly as the magi weighed their options. Balthasar felt something was off, so he spoke cautiously.

"You have been told correctly," he began, "that we seek to pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews." In his peripheral, Balthasar saw a subtle wave of uneasiness work its way around the chamber. "Two years ago, each of us saw his birth in the stars, and it is our hope," he continued cautiously, "that you might be able to point us in the right direction." Herod's smile had not wavered, though Balthasar could see the gears turning violently in his head. Herod's eyes darted to his captain and gave a curt nod, an unspoken order, which the guard followed obediently, leaving the room.

"Of course, this is such wonderful news," Herod said pacing in a circle around them like a shark, "and we will be all too delighted to help you on your quest, for it is ours too. For centuries Israel has awaited her Messiah, the one who would return us to our former glory. You must tell us everything you discovered, everything that brought you here." He stopped pacing and looked at them hungrily.

Again, Balthasar got the feeling something was very wrong. He had imagined that the Jews would be celebrating, that they would be in tune with the same wisdom that brought Balthasar all this way. If this shift was so grand that he had seen it from across the world, why hadn't these men, who were so close, been able to see it themselves? They had all of the traditions and stories and rituals to give them an advantage, but it was becoming clear that they

were clueless. That's when it dawned on Balthasar. He saw what was happening. How naïve he had been in his expectations.

His presence was an indictment of these people, a judgment on them. They had obviously grown so entitled to God's favor, so proud and in Herod's case so powerful, that they had neglected the actual God entirely. Their world was no bigger than themselves, God was no bigger than their own use of God, no wider than their own country and religion. Whereas Balthasar had travelled across the world because, in his pursuit of wisdom, he felt he was caught up in a story so much bigger than himself, these men had missed it because their stories were no bigger than their own appetites and ambitions. Of course they were not rejoicing at the news of a new ruler of the Jews, because it was a threat to the status quo, a status quo that seemed to be serving them just fine. It was a threat that Herod seemed ready to remedy.

With that, Balthasar knew they could tell him no more, could give him nothing that could be used as a weapon to act against the purpose of the cosmos. They needed to leave. He turned to signal to his companions, but found this was unnecessary. In their eyes, he saw the same lack of trust that he himself had just discovered. But still, Herod waited expectantly. Caspar, who was at once very curious but also very perceptive, countered. "But, your grace, please, our travels have been long and we have so many questions about your people!"

An unrestrained look of frustration flashed across Herod's face before he could hide it, but he spoke again with false patience. "Of course, let us sit down and speak over some refreshment." He snapped his fingers and a table was quickly set up with grapes and flatbread. For several minutes, Caspar exhausted Herod with questions about the Jews: their history, their religion, their customs, but eventually Herod cut Caspar off mid-question as the guard he had sent out re-entered. The guard had three men in tow, two up front with long beards, and a younger one behind them. They looked apprehensive. "Ah!" Herod said impatiently and gestured towards the three men. "This is Nathan, Saul, and Thomas, the best and brightest of our religious scholars." The scholars seemed uncomfortable at Herod's praise. "Our guests here have travelled far and were just inquiring into the birthplace of the *Messiah*." He enunciated the word *Messiah*, as if using it to issue a hidden threat to the scholars, one upon which they picked up. "Tell us," Herod urged, "where is he to be born?"

Balthasar opened his mouth to try to stop the scholar, to just buy him a moment to recognize what was happening, but he didn't have time. "In Bethlehem of Judea!" the younger man declared confidently. "The prophet has written: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, since from you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" The other two nodded with approval.

Oh, these fools, Balthasar thought. At once he recognized the sin of even those in his own tradition. These scholars knew everything there was to know about God with no connection at all to the Divine, to the cosmos. They used good and holy things carelessly, and good tools in careless hands could cause great harm.

Herod rounded triumphantly on the Magi. "Bethlehem of Judea, there you have it." The wise-men feigned gratitude. "Now, there is but one thing remaining," Herod said. "We will give you whatever supplies you need to go and find the child and bring a report back to me that I may go and pay him homage as well. You'll find him in Bethlehem, and you said you saw his star at its rising two years ago, yes? That would make him at most two years of age?" A stab of regret pierced Balthasar's heart. He should have been more careful.

“Yes, of course,” Caspar said, “with good fortune, we will return in a few months time with a full report on the child. As far as supplies for our journey, may I ask for transcriptions of your sacred texts, your prophecies and history? For I am a scholar and would greatly value the opportunity to learn more about your noble people.”

“Consider it done,” Herod snapped eagerly.

“But, your grace...” one of the elder chief priests protested incredulously.

“I said, consider it done,” said Herod dangerously, and the priest shrank back, anxiously taking his leave to retrieve copies of their sacred scrolls.

Nearly a week later, Joseph rested his tired muscles as the sun steadily disappeared below the horizon. He was still troubled by his dream, or the faint memory of his dream weeks earlier. As his wife lit their lamp and his son drew pictures in the dirt, he pondered on the temporality of it all. This season, this complicated stay in Bethlehem... it could not possibly last much longer.

A voice outside of their shabby home made Joseph’s heart leap. “We pray your pardon,” the modest voice spoke, “but we are pilgrims passing through this place and we seek some direction.” His small son jumped up into his mother’s lap. Joseph was suspicious, but knew well what it was to be a stranger in an unwelcoming village, so he pulled the door open. Three men stood outside. Their complexions and accents told Joseph that they had travelled far indeed. The one in the front smiled warmly. “Thank you for opening the door.”

“Of course,” Joseph said remembering to be hospitable. “Come in. We don’t have much food, but we will gladly share what we have.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” the man said as they entered, ducking their heads under the lintel. “My name is Balthasar, and we...” he stopped still when he saw the two-year-old boy sitting on his mother’s lap. The other two men had noticed as well. Joseph thought he saw tears forming in the traveller’s eyes right before Balthasar, followed by his companions, dropped his small satchel and fell to the ground to lay prostrate before Jesus and Mary.

A few hours later, Mary and Melchior were playing with the child so Balthasar, Caspar, and Joseph could sit on the roof in deep conversation. After a moment of surprise, the travelers had explained to Mary and Joseph why they had come, and they celebrated as they shared stories. Now Joseph spoke in hushed tones. Balthasar and Caspar learned from Joseph that the Roman occupation of their land had been growing tense, and that there had been talk of revolution and radical messiahs to fight for independence. He spoke of quashed revolutionary groups and mass executions. Balthasar realized this must have been why the watchmen were so tense when he had spoken so openly about a newborn ruler. He also realized how much this danger must be weighing on Joseph. Balthasar asked him about it.

“You know,” Joseph whispered in response, “I’ve always worked for others, a carpenter on someone else’s job. I’ve always felt like a small piece of someone else’s world. When all of this started happening, it felt the same way. I felt as if I were just taking my place in a bigger, Divine drama.”

“We are familiar with this,” Balthasar affirmed. “The pursuit of wisdom is indeed the pursuit of something greater than yourself. You become a willing instrument in the symphony of the cosmos. But of course there are those who do not see it this way. Through their eyes, they are the heroes of their own legends, and the rest of us exist to do their bidding. This is what power and self-interest do to the soul. This is what makes Herod and your priests so dangerous

to you and your family.” He told Joseph about their encounter with Herod, and the threat that loomed just at the horizon. “When we leave here in a few days,” Balthasar said, “we’ll be taking a longer, more dangerous road to avoid passing back through Jerusalem, but Herod won’t be deceived for long. He’s afraid. He’ll come for you.”

In that moment, Joseph remembered his dream. He remembered it as clearly as he remembered the dream he’d had about Mary’s pregnancy. He’d been told that Jesus wasn’t safe, that they would have to leave, and soon. He knew they would have to immigrate to Egypt under the cover of darkness to find asylum. He shared this with Balthasar and Caspar. Caspar let out a quiet, cynical chuckle.

“Out of Egypt I have called my Own,” he said. “The universe is not, it seems, without a sense of irony.”

“What do you mean?” Joseph asked.

“I’ve been reading the ancient texts of your people,” Caspar continued, “your people who were protected by God as they fled *from* Egypt. It seems the oppressed of today become the oppressors of tomorrow. Your people forget who they are.”

Two nights later, in the dead of night, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus set out on their long journey.

Herod let out a thunderous yell, and hurled an elaborately engraved pot at the wall just to the left of his captain’s head. The guard did not flinch. Months had passed, and there was no sign of the travelers from the east. They had deceived him. Search parties had scoured Bethlehem and the surrounding cities, but the crafty Magi seemed to have vanished without a trace. Herod was livid, his entire body filled with white-hot rage. He lifted a wooden chair and smashed it across another. With ragged breaths, he ran a hand through his hair and calmed himself. There was too much at stake. He could not stand by and do nothing while *his* nation was threatened by a new, unknown power. And what would the Romans do when they caught wind of it? Herod’s well negotiated position of authority was fragile at best. He had to keep the peace, no matter the cost.

“Here are your orders,” Herod said deliberately. “You are to take a legion of men, and put to death every child two years old and younger in Bethlehem and the surrounding villages.”

For the first time in decades, the captain hesitated. Conflicted, he stammered, “but, sir...”

Herod rounded on him, throwing him against the wall and growling only inches from his face. “I have neither the inclination nor the patience to hear any response from you but ‘Yes, my Lord,’ do you understand? You are to assemble your men. You are to march on Bethlehem. You are to take every crying infant and every toddler away from their mothers. You are to kill them. You are to put to the sword any who resist, including your men, or I will find someone else and leave you to rot in Gehenna, are we clear?” The guard could smell Herod’s breath. He nodded his head and fell in line. Herod released him. It was done.

When Caspar heard about what had happened, many years later and long after he had parted company with Balthasar and Melchior, he wept bitterly. Now well versed in Hebrew scripture, he sang out the words of the prophet Jeremiah, “A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and lamenting loudly: it was Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, for they were no more.”

Jesus grew up a foreigner in the land of Egypt, a people with customs and religion so different from the Jewish traditions Joseph and Mary tried so hard to keep. As he grew aware of the ways his family was different from the rest, he would often ask Joseph why they had to live in Egypt, why they couldn't return to their people. Every time, Joseph would go fetch the Magi's gifts from their hiding places and let Jesus run his fingers over them as Joseph told him the story of the travelers, of Herod, of the religious scholars, of the dreams, of the murders, of everything. Sometimes Jesus would steal away by himself to take the gifts out and look at them, recounting the story to himself. It shaped the way he saw powerful people, the way he saw the religious elite, the way he saw foreigners and those forced to the margins of life. It shaped the way he heard the stories and prophecies of his people. It became part of him.

When the time came and word reached Joseph that Herod had finally died, they prepared for their return to Israel, a place Jesus had no conscious memory of, but felt he knew well. As they journeyed together towards Nazareth, Joseph knew that this narrow escape had been only the first in what would certainly prove to be an extraordinary and dangerous life for his young Messiah.

"Oh Lord," he prayed, "help us."