

We are going to continue the story from out of Matthew this morning. Lorre read the part of the story of the Wise Men or Magi. Next we are going to read about what happens next in this story.

We are reading this story today because we are approaching the 12th and final day of Christmas. The 12th day will actually be on January 6th which is Wednesday and we call this day “Epiphany” which means “manifestation.” In many cultures Epiphany is more important than Christmas. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is to feed the camels of the wise men who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks for continuing their journey to Bethlehem.

Read Matthew 2:12-23

I will admit that I don’t know a heck of a lot about salmon. All I know about salmon is that they swim upstream and it happens somewhere near the Pacific Coast. I know they swim up rivers around the Northwestern United States and Canada and that dams make it difficult for them to navigate these waters. I know that there are some cute videos out there of bears trying to catch and eat salmon.

But this week I learned something quite interesting about salmon that I think might help us understand the part of the Christmas story that we tend to overlook or find too difficult to digest.

Salmon are born in freshwater streams and then they leave their birthplaces and journey out to the sea where they roam the oceans of the world. They eventually return to the exact spot where they were born in order to spawn and continue the next generation of their species.

Most of us have seen the scenes of these salmon making their way up waterfalls to their native pools against tremendous odds. As many as 20 vertebrate species including elk, deer, and bear feed directly on these salmon, recycling these ocean borne nutrients into the soil. Salmon born in Idaho will make their way 900 miles inland and climb 7,000 feet as they return to spawn.

But this is what I found really interesting about salmon. Over 137 species of animals in the Northwest rely on salmon as part of their diet. When salmon die they generate the most biologically diverse forests of earth, honoring future generations with the gift of the journey is at the heart of who they are. Salmon leave branches of streams no larger than a broomstick and make their way to the ocean for years and then return weighing up to 60 pounds. Salmon bring a mass of nutrients back to the forest to feed it and to the generations that follow.

The long journeys that salmon take are necessary to enrich the lives of the community in which they are born. And not only do these salmon enrich the lives of the community where they are born but the community is dependent on the salmon to bring back what the salmon acquired out in the world.

Today's passage is a story about journeys. Some chosen journeys and some journeys thrust upon the travelers from outside. All of the journeys in this biblical account are stories involving danger and potential death.

The first part of the story is the story of the Wise Men or Magi. Contrary to what many of us think, the gospel writer Matthew never says that there were three of them. There were three gifts but never are we told that there were three men. Matthew also never refers to them as kings. The image of these travelers being kings comes from Old Testament allusions found in the Psalms and Isaiah.

So rather than picturing them as three royal riders outlined against the desert sky, it is probably more accurate to imagine a caravan of sorts. A caravan that would include astrologers, servants, and sales people. This caravan was a community of people.

The gospel of Matthew says that these men in this story are “Magi” from which we get the English word “magic.” The Magi are probably a group of astrologers who study the stars for significant events. They most likely come from Babylon which would be modern day Iran or Iraq.

When King Herod hears from these Magi about the birth of a king, Herod calls a meeting of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the church Session for the Jewish people so to speak. What is also interesting here is that Herod typically had a very hostile relationship with the Sanhedrin, but not in this story that we have before us.

After meeting with the Sanhedrin, Herod becomes very concerned by this birth of a new king. So much so that he prepares to bring death to this child and any child that might be this child.

Herod tells the Magi to let him know where the child is as soon as they find him. But these Magi have a dream to not return to Herod. They decide to return home to Babylon by a different route.

And it is at this point when this story of the birth of the Christ takes a very deadly turn. Joseph is warned in a dream that they must flee and become refugees to Egypt. In the dream Joseph learns that Herod is out to kill the young child. When Herod realizes that the Magi are not returning to him, Herod has all boys 2 years and younger killed.

This killing of two year olds leads us to believe that Jesus must have been older than an infant when the Magi arrived. Today we call this murderous act of terrorism by Herod the “Killing of the innocents.” The birth of Jesus results in the death of many innocent children.

So Joseph, Mary, and the young child Jesus flee to Egypt where they live as Middle Eastern refugees. Imagine the refugee camps you see today throughout the Middle East as people flee war torn areas and this gives you a modern day glimpse into what it was like for Jesus and his family as they fled Herod and his murderous plots.

But Herod eventually dies and Joseph, Mary, and Jesus return to Israel. They eventually settle in the region of Galilee and in the town of Nazareth. Nazareth becomes the home town of Jesus.

The story of the killing of all 2 year old boys in a town is the part of the Christmas story that we leave out of pageants. Who wants our cute little manger scenes interrupted by the slaughter of innocent babies? But this is part of the story of the birth of Jesus as well. His birth meant a challenge to the power held by some and they were going to do anything they could to preserve that power.

Part of me wishes that these mass murders were not part of the Christmas story. But I wonder if the journey as a refugee to Egypt by the family of Jesus was not an important part of helping Jesus become who he is? I wonder if growing up in a family with parents who knew what it was like to follow God and live as an outsider was an important learning for Jesus?

Getting back to the story of the salmon, I wonder if living as a refugee and as an outsider helped Jesus develop the capacity to have a better appreciation of what it means to be the outsider? I wonder if these experiences of Jesus and his family helped Jesus to form a stronger bond with people who were the outsiders and outcasts.

I also wonder if the journey that the Magi or Wise Men embarked on was also important in the story of the birth of the Savior. Because these Magi journeyed from a faraway land and came to worship the "King of the Jews," their long journey represents for all of us that this birth is not just for the Jews of Israel but for all of the world.

All of us are on some type of journey. And like the salmon your journey may seem like it has taken you far from home. Maybe you are on a journey that has not always been an easy journey. Maybe your journey is filled with events and experiences that you would just as soon forget. Maybe your journey has some events along the way that are embarrassing to you in some way.

But I wonder if our journey is like those salmon in the Northwest. Maybe all of those experiences that we have had and that maybe we are having are helping to provide something that we can take back somewhere. Maybe we are on a long journey of experiences that we are being prepared to take back somewhere to nourish a community like salmon returning to spawn in their homeland.

Instead of regretting things we have done or wishing some experiences away, maybe like salmon we are being granted a more diverse biomass that we can take back and share. Maybe we are the refugee like Jesus who is being equipped to share what we have learned along the way.

Arise and shine. The light is in you. Allow God to use your numerous experiences to enrich the lives of others and allow others to see God through you. AMEN.

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-Harkins, J. William, "Loaves and Fishes, Salmon in Particular," Vantage, CTS, Fall 2015, p.6-8

-Achtemeier, Paul, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 4, WJKP, 2009, p. 213-217

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