

Matthew 2:1-11
“The Magi’s Fire Truck”

One of my favorite Christmas jokes goes something like this.

A man from New York is visiting a small Texan town on business in mid-December. As he’s driving to his hotel, he passes a manger scene in front of the town’s library. Everything about the scene is pretty normal. Baby Jesus in a manger, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, three wise men. But there’s one thing that he’s never seen before: the wise men are all wearing firemen helmets.

As he’s checking into his hotel, he mentions this to the concierge. She looks at him with utter bewilderment and a little bit of judgment and says, “Why, son, don’t you know the story? It says right there that the “three wise men came from a-fire!”

I know. It’s hilarious. But I also love what this joke underscores, the fact that our ideas of Christmas have been just a little bit influenced by culture.

The wise men are a perfect example. If I asked you how many wisemen there were, you would say “three”. They have names, according to church tradition - Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. If I asked you where they show up in the story, you would probably say “in the stable, standing right next to the shepherds.”

And we like this version of the Magi story, right? This is a comfortable story, a cheerful story, a story we can tell our kids. There’s the wonder of the star appearing, of God using supernatural means to guide these three foreigners to worship this king they know nothing about. There’s the giving of gifts that inspires songs like Little Drummer Boy, and all the memes created in response to that song suggesting that maybe the

mother of a newborn doesn't want a kid to come drum right next to her baby.

So yes – three foreigners coming to worship Jesus and offering him gifts is a good story. There's nothing wrong with it. But it strikes me, in Matthew's telling of this story, that this isn't quite how the story goes. And his story isn't such a cheery one after all.

Matthew is the only gospel that recounts the story of the Magi, and he simply tells us that "Magi from the east came to Jerusalem."

We get the idea that there were three of them from the three gifts that were given. But it's possible there were more than three Magi, and almost certain that they would have traveled with a large group of servants and guards. They were making a long journey, after all.

Historical documents first name "Magi" as being a caste of priests in ancient Persia. They were then influenced by Babylonian elements such as astrology and magic, and by the time of Jesus' birth, the Magi were local court advisors of all things religion.

They would have been well-versed in Jewish prophecies, because they knew, when they saw the star rise, that it meant the king of the Jews had been born.

During the century before Jesus was born, the idea had arisen that a ruler would come out of Judea. This is based on a number of prophecies – Micah 5, which Herod's advisors quote to him, and Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17: "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

The magi, paying attention to this new star and with their knowledge of Jewish prophecies, decide to pay tribute to this new king, much as foreign courtiers would do for any new king.

It's probable that the Magi Matthew refers to came from the Babylonian region, some 900 miles from Jerusalem. Their journey thus would have taken several months to complete.

So while the magi and shepherds standing next to each other makes a nice story, it's simply not possible. Given that Herod, when he tries to destroy this new threat to his throne, orders all the boys under the age of two to be killed, it's likely that Jesus was in fact a toddler when the Magi showed up, living with Mary and Joseph in their new permanent home of Bethlehem.

And lets go back to Herod for a moment, because this is in large part a story about him. Herod also knows the prophecies, knows a king will arise from the line of David. And Herod knows he is not that king. He snuck his way onto the throne, serving as a puppet for Rome, aligning himself with the powers that be. Herod is in the last years of his reign, and is now his famously paranoid self, destroying anything and anyone that poses a threat to him.

So he is disturbed when the Magi ask him where they might find the king of the Jews. This we can understand based on what we know of Herod. But then Matthew tells us, "and all Jerusalem was disturbed with him."

Why?

Probably because, just like Herod, the other leaders of the Jewish people have aligned themselves with power. And those who have power will do anything to maintain power, to keep the status quo, to prevent change. What the Magi represent to them is that change.

There is a new king in town, a king they don't know how to deal with or reckon with. And if this king is in fact the Messiah – the son of David – and has been heralded to them by these foreigners, this also means

that their notions of the kingdom of God are about to change. The reach of God's love is extending, it would seem, to those outside the club. And those on the "in" can no longer maintain their wall of protection and privilege.

The people are afraid. Herod is afraid. And that fear leads Herod to order the slaughter of innocent lives. Fear leads the Magi to return home by a different route, afraid for their lives. Fear leads Joseph and Mary to pick up baby Jesus and flee, becoming refugees in a foreign country.

This is a much bleaker story than that of three smiling men kneeling before a manger. I get that we don't really want it to color our Christmas cheer.

But I wonder if it isn't a story we find ourselves in more easily than that of the three smiling wisemen.

Because if there are any two words that seem to describe the world we live in – in its bleaker moments, at least – it's fear, and power. And so the different parts of this story...have some frightening parallels to our own.

We know what it means for the leaders of nations to be paranoid, to pledge destruction of anyone who poses a threat to them, to use any means to consolidate power.

We know what it means for innocent people to be killed as a result of conflicts that have nothing to do with them.

We know what it means for people to flee their country as refugees, seeking safety in foreign lands.

The world is a scary place. Even for us, blessed as we are to live in a land that is relatively stable and secure, we feel the tenuousness of that safety.

Life feels...tenuous. Like it's changing, and there's more change coming our way. Each new news story feels like the wisemen showing up to Herod, informing us that something new has happened and we aren't quite sure what to make of, but it fills us with a sense of foreboding.

In the face of such uncertainty, people tend to do one of two things. We might try to hunker down and pull up the draw bridge and don our protective helmets, closing ourselves off from everything that feels threatening and swatting away anything that might disturb or disrupt. This was Herod's reaction to the Magi's news. He tried to contain the threat in an extreme way, getting rid of every child about whom the prophecy might pertain.

But we might also go to the other extreme, where we try to keep up with the uncertainty and change by reinventing ourselves again and again, severing ties with everything that might hold us back from staying ahead of the game, ahead of the change. If we can just find all the answers, just stay in control, we'll be okay.

Neither of these tendencies tend to bring us the comfort and peace we're so desperately looking for. Instead, they bring us to places of paranoia on the one hand, or fragility on the other.

So, what are we to do?

Well, according to Gregory Jones, the dean of Duke Divinity School, what we're best off doing when things feel tenuous and unsteady is to become...jazz musicians.

Jazz is an improvisatory art form. Musicians are forever making things up, riffing, scatting, creating new melodies and sounds. But the only

reason jazz musicians can improvise is because they know the foundation of their music well. They know the theory, they know chord structures, so they know how to do something new in a way that doesn't feel chaotic or tenuous, but that feels right, and good, and beautiful.

And when I think about what God did in the incarnation, and what's happening in this story of the Magi's visit...well that feels a bit like jazz to me.

Because on the one hand the incarnation is built on this foundation of who God is and what God had been promising for centuries. The Magi paid attention to the star, and Herod was afraid of the Magi's story, because they all knew and believed the prophecies. This was an old story, built on the promises of God.

But it was also something very new. This was a king, a Messiah, a Saviour, not aligned with human power. Not aligned with Rome, or the Jewish leaders. This was a king who showed up to shepherds and pagans, who carried divinity in his humanity, and who would display his own power in the strangest of ways.

Because while Herod didn't manage to kill Jesus when he was a child, those religious leaders would be successful later in the story. At least, by their measure of power and success. But even then, God was doing a new thing, a crazy thing, an unexpected thing. In the weakness of a slaughtered lamb, the full power of God was unleashed into the world. A power that says the last shall be first, and the weak shall be made strong, and the lame shall leap for joy, and mercy and goodness shall always prevail.

And that kind of power says that there is nothing to fear. Because when we feel fragile, or helpless, or lost, when the world isn't quite the way it

used to be and we are unsure of our place within it, we are exactly where God has called us to be. We're in that place of the cross, laying down our own power for the sake of the other, trusting in the promises of God who is always doing a new thing.

So while the story of the three Magi next to the shepherds might be a good story...I think what we actually read in Matthew chapter 2 is a better one. *This* story reminds us that God keeps his promises, but does so in surprising ways. This story invites us to be jazz musicians.

This story calls us to remember God's promises –

the promise that he will never leave or forsake us,

that he will bring healing and shalom,

that death never has the final word,

that power is found in weakness,

that the kingdom he is establishing is a kingdom where the wolf lies down with the lamb

– this story calls us to remember those promises and build our lives upon them. For with these promises as our foundation, we can live in eager expectation for what new thing God might do, and what new way of being in the world he might be calling us to – amidst, and maybe even through – the uncertainty of the age.

One of the verses that we just sang in the song "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" goes like this:

"Yet with the woes of sin and strife
the world has suffered long;
beneath the angel-strain have rolled
two thousand years of wrong;
and man, at war with man, hears not

the love-song which they bring;
o hush the noise, ye men of strife,
and hear the angels sing.

I pray that this year we would hush the noise of all our strife so we might hear the angels sing – sing a jazz melody – declaring that Christ is God’s anointed one – he is the true king – and of his rule and his power there can be no end. But more than that I pray that we would have that song upon our lips, so that our words and deeds would point people to a hope rooted in the promises of God, who is turning the world around.

Would you pray with me?

O God, help us live by your power.

Show us how much bigger you are than our individual stories of fear and control.

Hush our warring cries and give us instead songs of praise declaring that you are Lord of all, and with you, there is always hope.

Do a new, a crazy, an unexpected thing in our lives, in this country, in your world.

In the name of your son, our King, we pray,

Amen.