

# A Light to a Dark World

Matthew 2:1-12

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

January 10, 2020

Last Tuesday morning the church staff met via Zoom to plan this worship service. That is our weekly schedule. It normally takes a day or two to work out the details but by the end of the week everything has been finalized.

It would be an Epiphany service, which traditionally features the visit of the wise men. We would read from the Hebrew prophet Isaiah about light and sing Ruth Duck's hymn based partly on that text. I would preach a sermon about light in a dark world.

Then the next day, Wednesday, January 6, another day that will live in infamy, along with December 7 and September 11, well, you know what happened. A mob numbering in the thousands swarmed on to the Capitol grounds. Hundreds crashed into the building that is the closest thing a secular government has to a sacred space and defiled it. When it was over five people were dead, including a police officer. By the end of the week, it seemed clear that there would be an effort to impeach the president a second time.

The worship service has proceed as planned, as you can see, and I will preach a sermon about light in a dark world, because it is about darkness, and we are in a dark place as a country. But it seemed liturgically irresponsible to proceed as if nothing happened.

We are not the same country we were just four days ago.

We are finally having to face the truth of who we are as a people. We have always known that there were angry, embittered people on the far right, some of them dangerous. On Wednesday they came to Washington in numbers from across the country, brought by some kind of collective delusion that they could force the overthrow of an election.

President-elect Joe Biden said, barely controlling his anger, "This is not who we are." In a sense, that is true. It is not who we are when we are at our best. It is not who most of us are. But we risk harm to our republic if we continue to deny there are people in our country – dissatisfied and angry -- who can be, as Wednesday showed, led into chaos and anarchy.

Add to that the fact that we now have two members of Congress who are QAnon adherents. They did not enter the House of Representatives deceptively, under the guise of "a little to the right of center." Marjorie Taylor Greene said openly, "There's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take this global cabal of Satan-worshiping pedophiles out." That was not hyperbole. She really believes that of some of Democratic colleagues. She was elected by the citizens of Georgia. If there is any good news, it is that she won only 75% of the vote – and she was running unopposed. I suppose the remaining 25% voted for Anybody But.

The First Baptist Church of Washington, D.C., published a statement this week expressing its collective shock: "before Wednesday, our congregation had never seen violent insurrectionists, incited by our nation's own president, breach the very seat of our democracy to ransack historic property and violently attack our nation's elected leaders." It concluded with a call to prayer:

*for a greater resolve among the people of our nation to resist the sinful ideologies of White supremacy and Christian nationalism; . . . for the will to reject dehumanizing discourse and to confront one another without hatred, bitterness or indifference; for the resolve, as we endeavor to seek peace with our enemies and with those of different convictions, to resist every false peace undergirded by silence and the status quo; (and) for an awakening of conscience in, and genuine repentance by, those who committed this assault on our Republic, and for the political and religious leaders who encouraged and enabled them. Amen.*

May that be the prayer of all Americans today.

\*\*\*\*\*

In 1857 an Episcopal priest, John Henry Hopkins, Jr., wrote “We Three Kings of Orient Are” for a Christmas pageant at his church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. He got a few things wrong: they weren’t kings, there weren’t three of them, and they weren’t from the Orient. It is a jaunty, happy tune, fit for the part of the biblical story it tells, the part about the star, which was a sort of ancient GPS that led the magi to the stable where the babe slept in the manger. I say part of the story because, we – and by “we” I mean the church and culture generally -- have agreed to tell only half the story about the visit of the magi.

Matthew’s story, the telling of which occupies the entire second chapter and not just the first verses that we typically read, includes one of the most horrific stories in the Bible. We choose not to tell that part at Christmas or Epiphany or any other time, understandably so perhaps, but in so doing we miss the point. The point being, in the words of John’s Gospel, “*The light shines in the darkness.*” (1:5) The darkness that precedes the light and makes light necessary. The darkness of oppression and suffering.

That is the story I want to tell this morning in four parts, beginning perhaps 1,500 years before the visit of the magi to Bethlehem, coming ultimately to our own day. I hope you can follow the thread.

### **Part one.**

Rachel was the wife of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, to whom the promise was made, “*I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.*” (Genesis 13:16) But Sarah, Abraham’s wife, could not have children, a serious impediment to having descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth. Sarah finally gave birth, miraculously, to Isaac in extreme old age.

Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, was barren as well. What are the odds? It was a common device; it heightened the drama. Miraculously, she gave birth to twin boys.

Rachel, in the third generation, was also barren. In order that her husband might have male heirs, Rachel gave her servant to Jacob. But as the years passed, she grew more and more bitter. Then, again miraculously, she became pregnant and had a son, Joseph. And became pregnant again. But this time her labor was hard. And when it became clear that she would not survive the birth of her child, her nurse told her that her baby was a boy, a male heir whom she named Ben-oni, which meant Son of My Sorrow.

The ancient historian records, *“So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day.”* (Genesis 35:19-20)

### **Part two.**

Hundreds of years later. The war was over. Judah, all that remained of David’s once mighty kingdom, was no more. Jerusalem lay in ruins. Solomon’s magnificent temple had been destroyed. The leading citizens – clerics, academics, business leaders – were being rounded up for deportation.

The sad image that comes to mind are Jewish families waiting to board cattle cars bound for concentration camps scattered across Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe. They are huddled together as families, not speaking, carrying only a suitcase or maybe a violin case.

Jeremiah, the prophet, witnessed the fall of his country. He watched as his broken people walked silently to the site from which they would be deported, a village outside of Bethlehem named Ramah. (Jeremiah 40:1, 4)

With grieving heart, he wrote:

*A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted,  
because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15)*

### **Part three.**

Matthew is telling the story of the birth of Jesus, not the part about the shepherds – Luke had that story – but the part about the visit of the magi.

Mysterious visitors from “the East” arrived in Jerusalem and told a marvelous tale. A new star had appeared in the sky, and according to their religion – they were not Jews – that was a sure sign that a new king had been born. They had followed the star until they arrived in Jerusalem, but there they were stuck. So, they went to King Herod and asked where the “king of the Jews” was to be born.

When Herod learned that the infant king was to be born in nearby Bethlehem, he asked the magi to find the baby and return and tell him its location, because he wanted to visit the young family. Of course, his intentions were not benign.

After the magi visited the newborn baby, bringing their famed gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. They returned home a different way.

That is where Matthew’s story turned dark. Very dark. Matthew records: *“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.”* (Matthew 2:16)

When Matthew imagined the horror of that scene, the wailing of young mothers as they watched their infants being killed, he remembered the poem of Jeremiah:

*A voice is heard in Ramah,  
lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children (again);*

*she refuses to be comforted,  
because they are no more. (Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:18)*

**Part four.**

Jocelyn was interviewed by ABC News on the Mexico side of the border near El Paso. She was scared.

"It's a terrible thing, the experience we've had," she said. The experience was seeing her fourteen year old son, James, taken from her when she was apprehended for crossing illegally into the United States, seeking asylum after fleeing domestic violence in her home in Brazil.

"He didn't know where he was going," Jocelyn said, "so he was looking at me like, 'Mom, help me, because I don't know where they're taking me.'"

James, whom she had not seen in eight months at the time of the interview, was more than 1,000 miles away in a resettlement center in Chicago.

"I didn't know what was going to happen to us," she said. "I spent the night crying."

Rachel weeping for her children yet again.

Jocelyn's story is ages old. As old as families waiting to be deported – for political purposes not their own -- 1,200 miles to an unknown country, not knowing if they would ever return. As old as mothers weeping for their murdered babies in Bethlehem two thousand years ago.

\*\*\*\*\*

The "slaughter of the innocents," as that tragic incident in Matthew's story has come to be called, is not incidental to the Christmas story. It is not the "dark side" of the Christmas story. It *is* the Christmas story. The babe was not born in Bethlehem so we could enjoy "chestnuts roasting on an open fire." The light came into the world because the world was dark. The light came into the world because there were brutal rulers who would do what Herod did. The baby was born to expose, challenge and redeem a darkened world, even if that world would take his life.

And that task of being light in a dark world has been passed on to those of us who are called by his name. "*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven,*" Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. (*Matthew 5:16*)

With the task we have been given a promise: "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not (will not, cannot) overcome it.*"

"Arise, your light is come!" wrote the hymnwriter Ruth Duck, echoing the prophet Isaiah. The rest is pure Jesus: "Fling wide the prison door/Proclaim the captives' liberty, good tidings to the poor/Arise, your light is come! All you in sorrow born/Bind up the broken-hearted and comfort those who mourn."

His calling. And ours.