

John 1:1-18  
Matthew 2:1-18

### In the beginning

The beginning is a very delicate time.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, when we celebrate the revelation of God to all humanity, in the form of Jesus. Jesus has been born, and now the world begins to change. This is the beginning of the Good News - the Gospel. It is not a pretty process. It is not easy, or nice. The Gospel, the mission of Jesus, the revelation of God - this is feared, misunderstood, and it is opposed. Jesus begins his earthly journey as a refugee fleeing violence amidst the sound of lamentation.

The beginning of the Gospel is one of many beginnings this Sunday. This is the first Sunday of the Gregorian Calendar. It is also the start of a new preaching series at TUMC with the Gospel of John. I have elected to start this series right at the beginning and explore Epiphany (God's revelation) through the first words of John and the story of the Magi. We will see where God is revealed, and we will see the places where God is NOT revealed.

### All things were made through him!

To do that, we go back to the beginning.

*IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD AND THE WORD WAS GOD.*

What is going on in these verses? Why begin a gospel in this way? Is it a synopsis of the rest of the gospel, like a poetic chorus that tells the audience what will happen in the work to follow? Is it supposed to fill in the background for any new listeners tuning in now? These eighteen verses testify the awesome universal arc of storytelling that prepares us to hear the Good News that John has of Jesus. They tell us the nature of the Word-made-flesh, and interpret for us the purpose of God's incarnation -

*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

These three births - born of blood, the will of the flesh, the will of man. These are the three ways that God is not revealed. God is revealed as we become children of God. We testify to God's glory and grace and power. But this power is not of blood, nor the will of the flesh, nor the will of man. These are not powers that God uses to be revealed.

First, born of blood. We are not made children of God through shedding of blood, either figuratively or literally. We do not fight our way into God's graces, defeating rivals and dominating the competition. Being born of blood also references the sacrificial victim, who takes on the sins of the community and is driven out along with our guilt. The modern equivalent of this is the scapegoating of others to build a sense of self. I think of bullying in schools and workplaces. I think of antisemitism and Islamophobia as Christian and secular state tactics to exclude and control. I think of Christian communities with strict purity codes that use fear of difference and disagreement to enforce conformity.

This is not the power that makes us children of God. This is not a power that God uses to be revealed.

Secondly, born of the will of the flesh. This is not simply flesh is evil and spirit is good. Far from it. This word flesh, 'sarx', could be alternatively translated as 'world' or 'system'. The will of the flesh is not primarily about the desires of an individual's physical body, but is about our collective human experience which is separate from our experience of God. The will of the flesh takes us away from trusting in God, and towards trusting in our own power. Instead of becoming children of God we become fans of tv shows, members of clubs, citizens of nations, invested in our own worldly experience. We are not born children of God by the will of the flesh because our own struggles to be human, to create and inhabit the world, to choose the right action - however good, these are not enough to make you a child of God.

This is not a power that God uses to be revealed.

Thirdly, born of the will of man, or of a man. The human system of patriarchy, which flows through the Bible, supposes that the basic unit of society is a man's relationship with his firstborn son. The firstborn son inherits wealth, responsibility and power. Patriarchy takes and maintains authority for the Father and passes it directly onto the Son, bypassing women, second sons, those outside the family, foreigners and slaves. Similarly, authority is concentrated in a royal line of Kings and their Heirs.

This is not meant to be the way of God's family. Patriarchy is about control and exclusion. At first glance, calling Jesus the Son of God relies on a view of God as the ultimate Father, but Jesus is also the Son of Man and through Jesus and by the Holy Spirit, everyone is invited to join God's family. Therefore, the patriarchal agenda has no power to make us children of God.

This is not a power that God uses to be revealed.

#### The beginning is a very delicate time

The reading from Matthew helps us see these powers, and God's rejection of them, more clearly. I want to go through each of them, taking them in reverse order, to illustrate what John said in only a few words. The gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy of Joseph, which I did not ask to have read out as part of the service. You're welcome. After the genealogy comes the familiar story of the angel giving council to Joseph when it is discovered that Mary is pregnant.

Now, consider this. For what reason would the gospel writer include an entire genealogy emphasising Joseph's pedigree, only to tell us that he is not in fact the father? This gently, even humorously, upsets the patriarchal expectation. This child is not born of the will of a man for a son. Instead, Joseph is told 'do not fear' by the angel and is invited to be a part of this family. His willingness to do so, to take responsibility for a mother and child despite their uncertain relation to him, comes from accepting the power of God, not the expectations of his patriarchal society, not the will of man.

In our reading from Matthew we had the story of the Magi, an integral part of the classic Christmas nativity. No Christmas Card stable scene would be complete without three slender figures with camels, carrying gifts, following a star. When we notice them at all, we might think about them as the counterpoint to the shepherds, attending on the birth of Jesus, representing

the whole people of the earth. The shepherds are uneducated Jewish peasants, bringing humble village crafts such as one might find in 10,000 Villages. The Magi are wise foreign kings, bearing costly gifts such as one might find in 10,000 Villages.

I think that is missing the point.

The description of these visitors as 'wise men' seems to be an attempt at a translation of Magi, presumably by early translators who did not know about Persian court religion of the ancient times, or did not expect their congregations to. That seems reasonable. Imagine trying to translate 'Jesuit' for an audience who knew nothing of Catholicism. Or 'Mennonite' for an Englishman. With our modern access to information we can be more specific. Magi were royal astrologers and court priests of Persia. Our visitors in Matthew were definitely not kings, educated, but not very wise, possibly not men, and we have no idea how many of them there may have been.

One thing is certain - they make an effective counterpoint to the shepherds in Luke's gospel. The shepherds were invited. The Magi are gatecrashers. While the shepherds are visited by angel choirs and invited to seek the new-born child, the Magi decide of their own accord to follow astrological signs to find the new King of the Jews. When examined in this light, they look less like devout seekers and more like wily courtiers, expecting to curry favour with the future monarch of a foreign state.

They are seeking a birth according to the will of the flesh - the cynical, worldly, cunning way. They see the celestial announcement of the coming of the Lord of the Universe and plot how they can ingratiate themselves with myrrh, incense, and common gold.

Naturally they go directly to the palace. Herod enlists his own court priests to assist their efforts to locate Jesus. We know how this part of the story ends. Inconsolable wailing. The Magi were utterly disastrous. Operating on their own agenda, they tip off Herod, force the young family into exile, and prompt a massacre of infants.

Some people have pointed out that there is no other historical record of this slaughter. Kings and supposedly wise men today are still pursuing avenues to power that necessitate the occasional massacre. We do not often hear about them, either.

The Magi are acting according to the will of the flesh, their desire to find rich and powerful patrons. It is only with an angelic intervention that they are prevented from returning to Herod, and return to their homes, perhaps willfully ignorant of the violence their interference has prompted.

Herod, though. Herod is acting according to his doctrine of blood. He kills to secure his power and eliminate rivals. This is well documented in the historical record, even if the minor massacre at Bethlehem was not worth commenting on. He is also a great builder, of the temple, palaces and fortresses. His contributions to the religious life of the nation are textbook for any sensible ruler - keep the priests happy in exchange for their support.

Indeed, thirty years later we see the Temple Establishment operating in line with the same spirituality, willing to shed blood to keep the peace, maintain order, quell rebellious rabbis like the grown Jesus, cooperating with greater empires abroad.

Herod's power is born of blood. It is not the way that God chooses to be revealed.

So what is left?

He has made him known

Jesus is not born in the patriarchal longing for unbroken family lines and strong social values. Neither is he born to satisfy human hierarchies of royal or religious power. Neither can he be born through bloodshed and violence.

*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*

God's revelation comes in the form of a family. We are invited to be a part of that family. This is accomplished through the fullness of grace and truth in the person of Jesus. We receive that grace, and are able to participate. Even when we have been hurt by these other powers, even when we have hurt others with these powers, there is still grace.

*Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.*

The beginning is a very delicate time. But according to French theologian Jacques Ellul, the Rabbis were never that interested in beginnings. The great foundational story for the Children of God was always the Exodus from Egypt, not the Genesis creation. This is Israel's 'Beginning'.

John begins his book by situating it in the glorious galactic adventure of God dwelling with humanity. Matthew begins his book by showing a pair of frightened, faithful refugees trying to have a baby in spite of imperial politics and religious scheming. You might note that, just as John's 'In the Beginning' references the Genesis creation, Matthew's flight to Egypt mirrors the Exodus. Both Gospels tell of Jesus in the context of stories already known.

Ultimately, no beginning is ever really a beginning. Every beginning is really stepping into a story that is already going on.

When they found themselves part of the story, Joseph assumed he knew what was going on, the Magi interfered with what was going on, and Herod sought to rewrite in blood. Meanwhile, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Present since the beginning, indeed, constituting the very beginning of beginnings, the Word persists in creation in a new and wonderful way. His name is Jesus. We have welcomed him into the world and celebrated his birth, and now we seek to know him, and through him, to know the fullness of grace and of God. As we continue through the book of John, we are all invited to step into the story. To come and see.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, he was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*