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Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epiph, All Yrs

" On entering the house, ... they knelt down and paid Him homage. "



One of the tools I was very grateful for in seminary was a table of synoptic parallels. Now, this may sound like an optometrist's device or an obscure piece of gymnastic equipment, but it's actually a very handy aid for Bible study and sermon writing. It is essentially a long chart that lists the various episodes and occurrences in Jesus' life and then tells you where in each of three synoptic gospels—St Matthew, St Mark and St Luke—they appear.\* It's a good way to understand how each of these evangelists chose to emphasize and-or characterize various aspects of Jesus' life, mission and identity.

As I was preparing this evening's sermon, I glanced at a table of parallels that I hadn't used before, and I noticed something interesting: Under the heading "The Adoration of the Infant Jesus," it listed the passage we just heard about the Wise Men's coming to Bethlehem *as well as* the passage in Luke we heard on Christmas Eve, about the shepherds' making their way to the stable. It was a bit of an 'aha' moment for me. Probably because our liturgical calendar highlights, every year, *both* the Nativity of Christ *and* His Epiphany— that is, His Manifestation to the Gentiles, in the person of the Wise Men—and does so sequentially ... as if one event followed another .... I never before realized that only *Matthew* tells the story of the Epiphany and only *Luke* the story of the shepherds.

The Lucan version is full of drama, spectacle and wonder, which is probably why it is what we hear on Christmas: angels singing the Glory of god and the humble shepherds making their way to Jesus: It is a fitting conclusion to the entire arc of episodes Luke relates in the lead-up to Our Savior's birth. And to Ancient Near Eastern ears, all of this miracle and mystery would clearly signal the birth of a mighty person, of a messiah ... *of God*.

But Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is a quieter, simpler account. An angel visits St Joseph, not the Virgin Mary, and she merely gives birth to Jesus. In Matthew's telling of the Nativity, pride of place goes not to Jesus' conception or delivery, but to His *lineage*: Matthew presents His genealogy running all the way back to Abraham, thus underscoring, for his largely Jewish (as opposed to Gentile) audience Jesus' Jewish identity—how the Nativity finally begins God's long-promised provision of a Messiah to Israel.† There is far less plot in Matthew than in Luke: no Annunciation by the Angel Gabriel; no Visitation of Elizabeth by Mary; no birth of John the Baptist; and certainly no shepherds or choruses of "*Gloria in excelsis Deo*."

No, in Matthew's telling of the Good News, the climax of the birth narrative—the "Adoration of the Infant Jesus," as my table of parallels had put it—is not the recognition of Divinity Incarnate by nearby shepherds led to Him by squadrons of angels ... but by strangers from a distant land and

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\* Some tables also include the more idiosyncratic Gospel according to St John, which I appreciate.

† Luke also includes a genealogy of Jesus, and it goes back even further, to Adam (*i.e.*, Jesus as the All-(Hu)man, as the Second Adam). This does not come, however, until Jesus is in his thirties and ready to begin His earthly ministry.

alien culture (probably in what is now the Arabian Peninsula), who have, it seems, used only their astrological training and intuition to discern that God has manifested Godself on earth in, of all places, the dusty outskirts of Jerusalem. While Luke's account of the shepherds is joyful and quite stirring—a 'thin moment' in which heaven opens itself to earth, almost overflowing with emotion—Matthew's account is, in its own way, just as profound, in its simplicity and determination: With little to go on and at great personal risk, this stalwart band of Arabian star-studiers steadily plods across hundreds of miles of desert ... stops to ask a no-good king for directions ... and, led by a single star, ends up at Jesus' bed ... on their knees, in reverence and praise.

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If we might liken Luke's account to a cinematic tale of love at first sight—the shepherds swept off their feet, as it were, by the sheer beauty and amazement—then perhaps Matthew's account is a story of love slowly *discovered*: There are no swelling violins or fireworks, but rather a slow-paced, perhaps even somewhat tedious drama of people who have felt an inkling of motivation ... the slightest prick of attraction ... and then work and wonder and wander—maybe for years?—before finally realizing what they've been feeling and how to respond. For it strikes me that the Wise Men's adoration—their falling upon their knees when they see the Infant Jesus—is not an in-the-moment reaction to what they've just now glimpsed ... but the overarching culmination of their *entire journey*: the initial inkling, the pondering, the planning, the questioning, the doubts, the ridicule of others, the risk ... the sheer dogged *faith* ... || ... *All of this ... all of it ...* is what brings them to Jesus and then forces them to their knees when they see Him.

And in Luke's and Matthew's parallel-but-compatible accounts of Jesus' birth, do we not find an apt metaphor for our *own* Christian lives? I know in my own life, there have been moments like those Luke's shepherds experience: times when I have felt, with every fiber of my being (and then some!), the presence of the Holy Spirit—not just beside me, but within me; critical junctures when I have known, in ways that I will never be able to explain, exactly what Jesus wanted me to do; moments when the aching beauty ... or the exquisite agony ... of what I was experiencing could flow only from ... or be endured only in ... the hands of All-loving God. Such are the 'shepherd' moments of faith.

The majority of our faith, however, is spent in the humdrum, in the routine. We plod from one thing to the next. We may catch a glimpse of something 'up there' and decide to set our designs upon it ... only to be distracted by the *next* blinking star we see or, if we lower our heads an inch or two, by the relentless realities and responsibilities right here on the ground. We endeavor to become 'better' Christians—read more Scripture, donate more of our time or money, pray more fervently—but then become dismayed when we notice nothing coming of our efforts after a week ... or a month ... or even a year. Or maybe, when we confide to our friends or co-workers what we believe and what that means for our lives, their bemused ... or cynical ... or incredulous reaction deflates us: makes us wonder whether we're wasting our time; whether we're missing out on the fun that others ... unencumbered by our slow, meandering, often dusty quest for God ... are having (or at least appear to be).

We spend most of our faith on-the-road, like the Wise Men, not really knowing where we are going ... or why. And yet, like the Wise Men, we keep at it. Our faith leads us from our comfort zone to the danger of the desert to the unknown of a foreign land. Perhaps the water in our

canteens runs low; perhaps our camels grow weary. Maybe the person *we* ask for directions is even more dishonest than Herod.

But none of that—*none* of it—matters when we feel the flutter of the Christ Child in our hearts. All is eclipsed when we sense the movement of the Spirit in a loved one's smile or a little one's exuberant hug or homeless person's outstretched hand. Again and again, in the most unexpected, most pedestrian moments of life, our faith turns us ... always; reliably; reassuringly ... to God. Not because we are emotionally overwhelmed or spiritually overawed ... but simply because we *are journeying*—are following that still small voice of God within us. Precisely because we have been making the long, wearying, wandering spiritual trek of the Wise Men, in the deep and trusting faith ... in an instant, we, like they, fall on our knees ... bow our heads ... and offer the very treasure of our lives to Christ.



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