

Lockdown in Jerusalem

It was not the best time to travel. A cold winter wind was blowing over the desert, and the travelers avoided each other as much as possible because of yet another pandemic in the orient. Melchior led the expedition of the three Babylonian stargazers. Accompanying him was Caspar, an older and very knowledgeable colleague. The third and the youngest was Balthasar, who pushed forward and was not impressed by a virus. The three followed a new star in the constellation of the Pisces because it shown so brightly that they were convinced this star is a sign to announce the birth of an exceptionally powerful king. The star appeared to have formed out of Jupiter and Saturn and stood in the West every evening. It could only mean that the new king was born in Palestine.

Despite the closed caravanserais, the three wise men made good progress. They had everything that was necessary for the journey including presents for the royal baby. After one good week on their camels, just before Jerusalem, they arrived at a roadblock heavily guarded by Roman soldiers, who would not let anybody through. Jerusalem was in lockdown.

Balthasar crept up to a nearby hill and came back disappointed: "I have seen the golden pinnacle of the temple, but it's too dangerous, guards are everywhere." Melchior decided: "We stay here and wait until a royal messenger comes out and we ask him about the birth in the king's palace."

The three Babylonians took turns keeping watch. No messenger came from the city. On the next day, a woman approached the roadblock from the opposite direction. She told the news of an extraordinary birth in a stable in Bethlehem. "This is exactly the opposite of the highborn child we are searching for," sighed Melchior, visibly burdened by his responsibility.

Two days later, a group of shepherds appeared. They wore dirty, ragged clothes and no face masks, but their eyes were bright.

"We have found the Messiah in Bethlehem!" one of them shouted in joy.

"Is the Messiah a king?" Balthasar wanted to know.

"Yes, like a king, but just very different."

"How did you recognize him?" Caspar asked.

"It was exactly what was told to us: A newborn lying in a manger in a stable."

Melchior was skeptical: "And what do your scribes say? A king who is born in a stable?"

"We don't know, but we have seen it with our own eyes."

"Stop now!" Melchior was impatient. "You simple shepherds, don't believe that you know more than the learned people! Princes are born in golden palaces, not in dirty stables!"

The shepherds continued on their way, and Melchior looked again in the direction of the city.

Now and then someone passed by with special permission. Nobody knew anything about a new king. After another day, the wise Caspar said: "We have discovered a very special star and assume that it is the star for a very special person. But we don't know where such extraordinary people are born...."

"Are you nuts?" Melchior replied. "Imagine the dirt in a stable! There you find only poverty and misery. No important person could be born there."

"Maybe an extremely humble birth is the requirement for the highest office."

The young Balthasar remained quiet. Of course, Melchior was right, but he was almost bored to death within sight of their goal. He and his young camel desperately needed some exercise. "Have you noticed that the new star is now in the South, towards Bethlehem? I suggest we go there to check it out. It is only three hours from here."

Melchior was the boss, but he felt overruled and since he had no better idea, he gave the orders to set off.

On the way they met the mayor of Bethlehem. He was sitting in a pompous carriage and was accompanied by several servants. Balthasar casually questioned one of them about a new born king. "Not heard nothing. Not possible." It was getting dark. How should they find the stable? They asked a shepherd at the wayside. He spoke in an incomprehensible dialect, but was very excited, fidgeted with his arms and showed them a way. The new star, brighter than before, pointed the same direction.

It was a very ordinary stable, even a bit more rundown than the others. The three wise men got off their camels. Melchior had a desolate look at the presents: gold, incense, and myrrh. The contrast couldn't be greater. "Oh my God, what are we doing here?" he sighed. As in a dream he put on his face mask, followed his colleagues and entered through the damaged door.

Some animals moved, when the visitors entered. It was dark. Only a candle was burning in a corner and barely shed light on a man and a woman nursing her newborn.

Melchior was convinced: "This can't be it."

But Balthasar asked nothing daunted: "Excuse me, but is this the newborn king?"

"The shepherds said something similar. They visited us a few days ago," the woman answered and laid down the child in the manger on a sheet cushioned with hay. "He will become a messenger of God to bring peace," said the man.

In fact, the child radiated a peace that seemed to originate from another world, entirely different from the stable. The nightly darkness appeared no longer to be abysmal. The distance to the other people – boosted by the pandemic – was not infinite anymore.

"Here we have found far more than we have read in the stars," murmured the scholarly Caspar.

Melchior was astonished: "I could never have imagined it like this." But after a while he went out to the camels and got the presents.

Balthasar was excited and gave the myrrh to the parents saying: "You should anoint the child with this myrrh and proclaim him the king of peace. He will introduce a new era where the poor and the illiterate experience justice."

Arnold Benz, Christmas 2020