

God with Us?

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Matthew 2:1-12

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Just a few days before Christmas, 75 or so of us gathered in the historic Grove Theater to view and discuss Steven Martin's film, *God with us: Baptism and the Jews in the Third Reich*. It wasn't exactly a festive way to celebrate the season; but as I look back on it, it was entirely appropriate. The film documented a tragically missed opportunity as it brought into the full light of day a church grasping for power and, in the process, losing its very soul. Viewing *God with Us* in the midst of the Advent season when those words are so often on our lips brought us face-to-face with the travesty of an evil regime presuming upon the favor of God, *Gott mit uns*, as it went about its despicable task of trashing human life. Some 80 percent of German pastors pledged loyalty to the Nazi state; and in an effort that went beyond what was even expected of them, facilitated the regime's campaign to rid the church of pastors with any Jewish ancestry. Some prominent "scholars" within the church went even further, beginning the task of purging the Bible and the church's hymns of all references to the Jewish faith and the Jewish people—not an easy task in light of the origins of our faith and the fact that Jesus himself was a Jew. Of course, there were those serious efforts to prove that Jesus was indeed an Aryan, not a Jew; and the Bethlehem in which he was born was not the Bethlehem near Jerusalem, but much farther away, in Galilee, the land of the *Gentiles*.

Perhaps even more disturbing, the film spotlighted a church so desirous to be front and center in the new world order that it combed its baptismal records to help Hitler identify those Jews who might have gotten away, those "Jewish Christians," those *Mischlinge* whose baptismal certificates or whose parent's baptismal certificates documented a Jewish parent. The pure hypocrisy, the blasphemy of such an effort had never before hit me with such force. Baptism, the very act that we celebrate as breaking down our barriers of division, the very act that says to us that in Christ, there is a whole new reality, became the means whereby one particularly "successful" pastor facilitated the condemnation of 2600 people to the concentration camps.

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ," Paul wrote to the Galatians, "have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:27,28). How many times in our lifetimes have we turned to those words of assurance as we have gone about the task of breaking down walls of discrimination that still exist among us? And how utterly despicable that the very act that dissolves those walls of hostility should become the means of raising them again. Race, ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, or whatever the prejudice of the day might be, we are saying, have more validity, greater standing than our oneness in Christ. If you will pardon me, it's enough, as my mother used to say, to make a preacher cuss!

If we are going to claim that God is with us, we had better be very, very careful to ask ourselves where we do indeed find God. And if scripture gives us any help at all (and it does), it says to us that we had better put aside our arrogance, our certainty that God is on our side, and turn our most serious and lifelong efforts to listening for and seeking to discern where God is in our world.

So, where do we find God? After detailing Jesus' genealogy from Abraham through David and then through the Babylonian Exile to the first century (and it would be a huge stretch of the imagination to depict this line as anything other than Jewish), Matthew says "the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way" and goes on to speak of an angelic announcement to Joseph, drawing upon Isaiah's vision of the birth of a child named "Emmanuel", which means, 'God is with us'" (1:18, 23). Scene 2 (chapter 2, that is) moves then to Herod and the wise men from the East who come looking for the child. Matthew seems to be painting the wise men's quest in terms of Second (or Third) Isaiah, recalling perhaps the words of Isaiah 60 with which we began our service. The prophet is speaking to newly returned exiles in the 6th century B.C.E., who have come home to a bombed-out city. The watch towers have been leveled, the walls destroyed, and the economy is in shambles. The prophet invites his despairing countrymen to hope and determination: "Rise, shine, for your light has come." He goes on to depict a Jerusalem that will again be a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a center of international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from the East, bringing spices,

gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Be sure to take note, however, of a competing image, an image not of overwhelming prosperity and proud self-sufficiency. Matthew paints the scene in terms of the word of hope spoken to the broken exiles: The wise men show up in Jerusalem, looking for the king, and they come bearing gold, frankincense and myrrh. He moves on, however, to speak of another place and another way of God's coming. He turns to the prophet Micah: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel" (Mt 2:6; Micah 5:2).

Perhaps you are familiar with the old characterization of something that is desperately wrong as being "off by a mile." Reflecting on Matthew's story, Walter Brueggemann observes the wise men were "off by nine miles." Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem. Rather than a king coming in royal splendor, the birth of Jesus represented that other story, that other hope depicted in Isaiah as well as Micah Remember Isaiah 40 and its beautiful rendition in Handel's Messiah? "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep."

"Our task," Bruggemann suggests, "is to let the vulnerability of Micah 5 [and Isaiah 40] disrupt the self-congratulation of Isaiah 60." In looking for the Christ, in looking for God, most of us, he insists, "are looking in the wrong place. We are off by nine miles." The way forward, the way to God and with God is not the way of congratulatory self-sufficiency. It is not "about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares" [Christian Century, December 19-26, 2001]. Dare we make the journey?

Epiphany calls us to live out of a new reality. Just as the birth of a baby creates upheaval throughout an entire household, Joni Sancken suggests, "the birth of God incarnate promises to turn the whole world upside down and forge a new reality" [New Proclamation Year C 2013]. And sure enough, "Herod," Matthew reports, "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Far from merely blessing the way things are and the way we've always known things to be, God-with-us challenges our assumptions at their foundations. Far from leaving us comfortable in our old prejudices, far from asking little more of us than that we attend to our own spiritual comfort, God-with-us draws us to journey into a whole new world. Isaiah saw it. Remember the words Rachel read to us this morning?

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: . . . I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. . . . See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them (43:5-9).

The Apostle Paul saw it, too. "We have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). That "newness of life," the very words we recite in every baptismal service we do, are not about victimizing the weak or turning our backs on those whom society chooses to disenfranchise in any time and place. They are not about "going along to get along" or currying favor with the powers that be. They are about marching to a different drummer and giving our lives in service to the one who comes among us as a gentle shepherd.

United Church of Christ pastor Kate Huey puts it well:

So, what do we hear in [the story of the Magi]? We hear that God has sent a gentle shepherd who will nevertheless upset the powers-that-have-been. We hear that the smallest things, like a newborn baby, can terrify the arrogant, and bring them down in the end. We learn that God's reach of grace goes far beyond every obstacle within or without, and pushes us beyond them, too. We learn that a great light has dawned, a light that draws all people and calls us to live our lives illuminated by its truth. That's what the Epiphany season is about—K. Huey, "Where is the Child?" *Sermon Seeds C*. Thanks be to God. Really! *Thanks* be to God!