

Out of Bounds

sermon digest

January 5, 2014

Matthew 2:1-12

larry dipboye

At the birth of Jesus, Luke tells of Jewish shepherds in the field who receive a direct revelation from angels. They travel to Bethlehem to see for themselves: they find the holy family with the baby lying in a manger as revealed by the angels. Matthew tells a very different story. He knows nothing of a general tax assessment, of Joseph's and Mary's trip to Bethlehem, of an overfilled inn, or a manger for a baby's crib. Matthew tells of wise men from the East, *magoi*, possibly astrologers, follow the heavenly revelation of a star to Jerusalem in search of the child born "king of the Jews," which happened to be Herod's title. So they unwisely inquire of Herod about the location of the child born to replace him. After consultation with biblical scholars, they are referred to Bethlehem some nine miles south of Jerusalem. Continuing to follow the star, they travel on to Bethlehem to Joseph's house, where they find the baby with his mother Mary. Too much reliance on Isaiah leads to the King James assumption that they are kings. The number of gifts assumes three kings. Neither assumption is clear in Matthew's story. The offerings of gold, frankincense, and myrrh indicate that they are wealthy. The Magi pay homage, then wisely decide to go home by another route to avoid Herod.

Look for the purpose beyond the facts of the story. The different birth stories tell of very different visitors at the birth of Jesus. We do not have conflicting histories here in which we need to separate fact from fiction. They are not histories so much as stories with a message beneath the surface. The appropriate question is not, what happened? The best question we can ask is, what is the message?

Only Matthew tells of foreign guests, not only from another geographical province like Persia but probably from a non-Jewish religion that early Christian readers would call "pagan." Only Matthew's Jewish Gospel affirms a revelation of God to aliens with strange religious beliefs and practices. Like many of the stories in the twilight zone of Christian memory, the truth of the story is not in the facts so much as in the mysterious message.

In Christian history, the Feast of the Epiphany, which focuses on the visitation of the magi to the child Jesus, is older than the celebration of Christmas. In the typical modern Christmas crèche the stories get blended into shepherds, with wise men, a star, and angels hovering over a stable. However, the Christian year that distinguishes Christmas from Epiphany maintains the difference in the stories.

Strange that the story of Gentile visitors to the birth of the Christ should be found only in Matthew, the most Jewish Gospel; but the imagination of Matthew extends beyond his own time and place. Long before the events recorded in the Gospels, the Hebrew Prophets envisioned a new world order where the natural hostility between Jews and Gentiles would end with peace on earth and even nature would be affected: lions would coexist with lambs. Matthew does not have to abandon his Jewish roots or purpose to allow mystery guests, aliens from another world, Persian magicians who watched for God's Word in the stars, aliens caught up in the coming of the Messiah in a way that Hebrew scholars of the time not only missed but rejected.

No one in Israel could ignore the Jewish connection and kinship with Persians, the Babylonians who invaded Judah and took a multitude of Jews into captivity for a half-century. Biblical scholars have found numerous evidences of influence from the years of captivity on the thinking and theology of Jews. Matthew's Magi belong in the biblical saga.

The story actually fits Matthew's purpose of fitting the Jewish revelation into a Gentile world. New Testament scholar Eduard Schweitzer further views Matthew's story of wise men from the East following a star to the Christ child not only as a play on Matthew's bridge to the Gentile world, but as evidence of direct borrowing from the pagan Roman culture. Schweitzer recounts a historical event that may have influenced embellishments of the story. In 66 CE, astrologers from Persia traveled to Naples in the company of King Tiridates to worship Nero as king of the universe. They were absolutely certain that the stars pointed them to Nero. Written a decade, Matthew is not so subtle in suggesting that the real king of the universe is Jesus, not Nero.

By the time of Matthew's Gospel, Gentile believers were pouring into the church. Suddenly the message of the gospel was no longer a provincial story about a privileged people; it had become in

Christ the word of hope for all of God's children regardless of language, race, or religion. So the final doxology in Matthew's Gospel is, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." The larger world outside of biblical Palestine that intruded on Jewish life with foreign visitors at the birth was the world into which Jesus sent his church in his final word to disciples. The message of the gospel, the message of Matthew's Gospel had gone full circle.

The Epiphany, the manifestation of God, transcends the theological limits set by our religion. In brief, Matthew pictures the God behind the birth of Jesus reaching and revealing beyond the boundaries of all religious bigotry—even ours. The witness of God in Christ affirms the universal presence and revelation of God that breaks down walls of separation and ignores the boundaries of our theological absolutes. The travels and witness of the Magi speak to our world of religious diversity like nothing else in the Gospels.

In three short decades, the religious complexion of our nation has changed radically. The primary question of Colonial America was, which Christian denomination or sect will dominate the politics of the nation? Very few Jews or Catholics lived in the New World, and the knowledge of other religions was only by the reports of occasional pioneers and explorers of other worlds. We could have easily become an Anglican establishment like England or a Congregationalist nation as intended by most Puritans. But the founding parents of the nation, primarily Jefferson and Madison, envisioned a nation without religious boundaries. The First Amendment guarantee of religious liberty allowed every religious form to exist and required all religions to coexist. We continue to struggle with the freedom of religion that has made our nation the most religiously diverse people on earth. Meanwhile the American experiment has exposed us to God's presence in other religions.

It was a lot easier to keep the boundaries in place and isolate the mental Christian image of non-Christian peoples when the various religions and peoples of the earth stayed in their place. As the world has grown smaller, our encounter with alien theologies has become a part of daily life.

Like most of you, I grew up in an exclusive religious community. The biggest question we faced on an occasional basis was whether Baptists from the North could join our church without passing through the waters of baptism. We tended to view other Protestants as Christians, but not our kind of Christian. All others were viewed as aliens from the God whom we claimed to possess. Missionary Baptists could be distinguished from the anti-missions Baptists because they had a global vision of our faith. But the modern world thrust us into a stew of uncertainty and raised questions about the boundaries around God that have really been around as long as aliens magicians have followed the star of Bethlehem.

Jesus was not the only child born at the center of a worshiping community. The joy and excitement of a newborn child in the family brings grandparents, uncles, aunts, siblings, and neighbors to the place where the baby lies for the sole purpose of offering up admiration and assurances that the child belongs to the family. No wonder children tend to view the world from their own center as if the persons, furniture, toys, and nature itself are satellites revolving around their existence. The process of growth to adulthood is movement from a world that revolves around the child to a gradual discovery of an expanding universe containing many children and a multitude of centers.

Most of us never fully outgrow the egocentricity of early childhood. Provincialism is the notion that we can draw boundaries around our place in the sun and declare it to be the center of the universe. Provincialism emerges in racism, nationalism, sexism, and even religious exclusivism.

In the Broadway musical *Fanny*, Marius is a young man with a hunger for world adventure. His father Cesar runs a tavern and demands that his son settle down to the traditions of their family and community. Marius challenges his father, "You think Marseilles is the center of the earth!" Old Cesar quickly replies, "It is. That is north, this is south; that east, this west, I am here, the center!" Marius protests, "But there are others!" Cesar firmly declares, "They are off-center." The argument ends with Marius going to sea to find the larger world and Cesar disowning his unconventional son.

Most of us have been something like old Cesar, thinking that the world revolves around our prejudices, our beliefs, our way of thinking, our judgments—even to the point of believing that God is locked up in our house of worship. It does not matter whether we locate God on top of Mount Zion in

Jerusalem, in the Vatican in Rome, or in the administrative offices of the nation's largest Protestant body in Nashville. The God of the Bible, the God behind the coming of Christ, is not our private possession.

In spite of the scandalous particularity of time, place, and person in the coming of Christ, the reach of the vision is beyond our little world and exceeds our wildest imagination. If God was evident to Persians in the first century, God is capable of speaking to Christians outside my church and religions outside my Christian faith.