

Epiphany Year A
Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2008
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The story of the visit of the Magi we just heard from St. Matthew's gospel is so rich and textured that today I am going to violate the first rule of preaching -which is to take one theme and hammer on it for the whole sermon - and instead look at three different thematic aspects of this passage. These themes are ever so slightly interrelated, at least in my mind, so I will attempt to tie them together. If I succeed it will be due more to my luck and your forbearance rather than any skill.

The first theme is that of rival kingships and the fear that rivalry arouses. Herod hears of this "one born king of the Jews" and is quite frightened by the rumor. Indeed, so worried is he that he resolves to cast a very wide net in an effort to kill this infant king before he can even become a threat, and so orders the death of every male child born in the region of Bethlehem over the previous two years. At the level of literal history there is no record of this "Slaughter of the Holy Innocents." Nowhere outside of Matthew's Gospel is there any such story, and I don't believe it really happened. But at another level of course it happened, for what it points to is the profound threat that people of peace and justice for everyone pose to those whose power is rooted in violence and privilege. So the fear that Herod felt is as historical as the fear that prompted the

assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. It is as historical as the fear that drove the Dalai Lama into exile. Please do not misunderstand me at this point. I am not equating those four people; I accept and embrace as true that whatever it means to be God was fully present and real in Jesus in a unique way, and in Jesus we discover the true character of God. The others I have mentioned were inspired by Jesus, and in greater or lesser degree imitated him, and lived out the kind of life he called us all to lead even though two of them make no claim to being Christian. But the fear that Matthew describes that arose in Herod is the same fear that attempted to kill Jesus when he was yet an infant, and which killed or exiled these people, together with countless others across the centuries. That is what I am saying, that is what I am equating, that terrible fear which Matthew describes in this passage, the fear that provokes people into becoming killers.

Nor is that fear as senseless as we here in the safety of this church imagine. In fact, the horrible tragedy is that it makes a lot of sense. For in a world in which building nuclear weapons to develop a so called "balance of terror" actually works as a means of keeping the peace what room is there for Jesus? In a world in which nations are willing to invade other nations because of what might happen later on, and our invasion of Iraq is by no means the only example of this, who wouldn't be afraid of the one who came saying "resist not evil, but if a man strikes you, then turn the other cheek." In a world in which people hi-jack airplanes and fly them into buildings in the hope of killing

thousands of people – and all in the name of God the “all merciful one” - what use is there for “The Prince of Peace?” We who claim the name of Christ need to understand that in a world in which all these things make sense to rulers this Jesus whom we adore, whom we worship as the Incarnation of God, makes no sense, and is indeed to be feared as one who is at least naïve, and at worst truly crazy. Throughout human history Jesus, and those he has inspired, have proved to be a far more dangerous rival to the rulers of this world than any other kind of enemy. So that is the first theme, that rivalry and that fear.

The second theme is found in the persons of the Magi themselves. They were not Jews, as Matthew told the story, nor did they become Jews. They were foreigners, Gentiles. And we need to understand that Matthew did not have to tell the story this way; he could have made them Jews, or could have made them convert to Judaism, and so Jesus would have been in the terms of Matthew’s account truly and only “the King of the Jews.”

But Matthew didn’t tell the story that way. He told it in a way that makes completely clear that in this baby everyone comes within the reach of God’s embrace, everyone is part of the kingdom of God, for it was Gentiles who came, and Gentiles who worshipped. That is what Ephesians says, for example, in our passage for today, where the author – probably not Paul, but someone who had good access to Paul – tells us that the “mystery” that had been hidden for ages but in Christ is now revealed is that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through

the gospel.” The “mystery” is not just that Jesus died and then somehow was alive. People are still saying that about Elvis. The “mystery” is that through that death and resurrection all have been incorporated into the life of God.

But this too makes what happened in Jesus very strange to the world as it is. For we live in a world in which it is very important to identify enemies. It is not just we who do this; it happens everywhere. The notion that God loves everyone, has included everyone, is an intolerable message to much of this world, for how can a person make enemies of those whom the God that person loves also loves. So many who are in positions of religious and secular power either ignore or twist the plain sense both of Matthew’s story and our Ephesians passage in order to maintain the ability to have enemies, often mortal enemies. The horrible tragedy is that in this world it becomes true. The ignoring and distorting works; we really do have enemies, and really have become enemies of others. So the theme expands; it isn’t just is there room for Jesus in this kind of world, it is the question of whether there is room for this kind of story in this kind of world? Is there room for a story of foreign people coming to a home in Bethlehem to honor and adore an infant who is so different from them? That is the second theme, the Magi, the gentiles, and the remarkable assertion this story makes that God has no enemies.

The third theme emerges from the gifts they brought. Gold and Frankincense are completely appropriate; they are the gifts identified in Isaiah 60 where we read “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the

praise of the lord. “ These gifts represent the twin realms of earthly power and heavenly presence. Myrrh reveals the touch of Matthew’s genius. Myrrh is a burial spice, and it foreshadows the death of Jesus, which is the means by which the power of God is both revealed and unleashed. God works in this world not by killing, and not by making enemies, but by dying and in that death reconciling. Therein lies the answer to the questions the first two themes introduced.

That answer is “Yes” there is room for Jesus. And yes there is room for his story. In fact, Jesus is the one truly essential presence in all this earth. In a world so paralyzed by fear that it provokes people into becoming killers the only way to hear the truth about God is through the one who was willing to die. In a world in which enemies abound, the only way to understand that having them is nothing so much as the working out of a tragic self-fulfilling prophecy, and not an inherent or necessary aspect of human life is through the one who had no enemies, who in fact told God to forgive even those who killed him, and whose whole life was thereby revealed to be devoted to reconciliation. Without Jesus our present craziness appears to be sane, and so we must have Jesus in order to see where true sanity lies.

There is room for Jesus in this world; there has to be, for with apologies to Abraham Lincoln, he really is the last best hope of earth. We who follow him, who call him Lord, need to understand this. What we see in this truly profound story of the visit of the magi is not just or only an invitation to a private

relationship with our personal savior. It is the call to see Jesus Christ as the very means by which we understand the entire world, and where true sanity, true hope and true life is to be found. Indeed, in light of the story of the Magi, we must reverse the question, and ask ourselves whether or not in a world in which God has acted as God did and does in Jesus, is there room for the kind of fear we see in Herod? The answer, to me at least, is "No."