

“Where Is the Child?”
Matthew 2:1-12, 16; Isaiah 60:1-6

A number of years ago, Jean and I took a ten day Reformation Tour. Although visiting sites such as Presbyterian forefather John Calvin’s church in Geneva, it concentrated primarily on places in Germany where the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, lived and worked.

Of course, a Luther tour is a reminder of how an obscure monk who was also a university professor turned Christianity on its head. Through the study of scripture, Martin Luther determined that human beings can only be reconciled to God through the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Nothing we do will earn our salvation. It is a free gift from a loving God. That idea led Luther to oppose the selling of indulgences, the granting of the forgiveness of sins through monetary purchase. Which, in turn, threw him into conflict with religious authorities, eventually leading into the Protestant Reformation which created the categories of Protestant and Roman Catholic we know today.

It is a wonderful historical and theological lesson to see how one man, convinced through scripture, changed the direction of the Christian faith both for those who became Protestants, and for Roman Catholics through the subsequent Counter Reformation.

But amidst this uplifting saga of one man’s fight for religious and theological freedom, we also made another stop, at Nuremburg. Nuremburg was the site of Adolf Hitler’s huge Nazi rallies where by costume and symbolism he tapped into German mythology and culture, attempting to create a quasi-religion to spew his venom of hate, exclusion, and war. Today, you can visit the Nuremburg parade grounds, stand on the platform where Adolf Hitler stood, walk the field that felt the tremor of evil. Nuremburg is a powerful reminder that a visit to the land of Martin Luther is also a visit to the land of Adolf Hitler.

In our scripture, the gospel writer Matthew wants us to know that a visit by the magi to the divine Jesus also meant a visit to malevolent King Herod.

Our story begins by informing us that wise men from the East showed up in Jerusalem seeking one who has been born King of the Jews. They had witnessed the rising of his star and came to pay him homage.

Now, through the centuries, much has been read into this story. For instance, the wise men were not kings. Using Psalm 72:10 as an explanatory verse for this event, Christians employed its mention of kings to suggest these wise men were eastern potentates. Actually, the wise men were called magi. The Greek historian, Herodotus, tells us the magi were originally a tribe of the Medes, which became a priestly caste among the Persians. Their specialty was the observation of the stars. They were astrologers. Which makes sense when the scripture says they observed Jesus’ star at its rising.

This would have sounded quite logical to Matthew's first readers. It was common to associate great men and events with the appearance of stars. The births of Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar and the fall of Troy were all believed to be foretold by stars. Through the centuries, even up to today, people have attempted to identify the star that led the magi. Various hypotheses have argued for a supernova, or Halley's Comet, or the conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars. But no one knows the source.

Just as we do not know the number of the magi. Three is the traditional number because of the three gifts. But the scripture does not tell us how many there were, where they came from, or what were their names. The plethora of stories and traditions attempting to answer these questions are just that – stories.

What we do know is that these visitors were very different from the citizens of Jerusalem. Their heritage, dress, customs, manner, and world view would have been considered foreign. And their religion would have branded them as heathens and idolaters.

President Calvin Coolidge's brevity was renowned. He was often referred to as "Silent Cal." One Sunday he returned home from church and his wife asked him what the minister's sermon was about. Coolidge replied, "Sin."

She said, "Well, what did he say about it?"

And the President answered, "He's against it."

Over the centuries, we have added many elements to Matthew's story of the magi. But at its heart, it simply states that Jesus is King of us all.

Now, I mention how little we really know about the wise men because it is important we do not allow peripheral elements to divert our attention from what Matthew wants us to hear. Throughout this gospel, Matthew desires us to see that Jesus is the fulfillment of scripture. Since his first readers were primarily Jewish Matthew uses the Jewish scripture, what Christians now call the Old Testament, to illustrate that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. That is the reason for our passage's Bethlehem quote from Micah 5:2.

But then, Matthew takes a radical turn by having the wise men visit and worship Jesus. The visitation of these magi announces that Jesus is a world wide Messiah. Jesus is the life fulfillment of all people, not just Jews.

This saga about the wise men is not a birth story, but an announcement story. It declares that Jesus is the one for whom the entire world has waited, Jew, Greek, male, female, slave and free. Matthew's use of the star, the scripture, and even Herod is to show that these events are not happenstance or haphazard, but providentially guided. Through Jesus, the walls of culture and skin color are destroyed. The magi signify that Jesus was not sent to one race, one people, one country, but to each and every human being. He is the light of the world. Or, as the story illustrates, even pagan, idolatrous, star watching, foreign magi come to worship him.

A minister was teaching a Sunday School class on the 23rd Psalm. He told the children how sheep are not very smart and need lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job was to stay close to the sheep, protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing things that would get them hurt or killed. He then pointed to the little children in the room and said they were the sheep and needed a lot of guidance.

Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows, indicating himself said to the children, "If you are the sheep, then who is the shepherd?"

Well, there was an awkward silence. Then Jennie, a second grader, said, "Jesus, Jesus is the shepherd."

The minister, obviously caught by surprise, said to her, "Well, then, who am I?"

Jennie thought for a moment, and then with a shrug replied, "I guess you must be the sheep dog."

In our scripture, Matthew wants us to note that Herod, and even the wise men, may at the time possess more active, dramatic roles. But they are actually only sheep dogs leading us to the one true shepherd, Jesus.

But amidst all of this positive celebration that God has sent the Savior of the world, there is also a warning. King Herod ruled Palestine from 37 to 4 BC, which means Jesus was likely born weeks or months before Herod's death. Herod was the consummate politician. His political skill enabled him to win the affirmation of Julius Caesar, plus survive with his crown intact the civil war between Augustus and Anthony. He could be incredibly generous, taking from his own resources to feed people during times of famine. But he could also be insanely jealous, evidenced by the murder of his wife, her mother, and three of his sons. Commenting on Jewish food laws, which forbade eating pork, and Herod's penchant for murder, Caesar Augustus made the famous comment that "it is better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son."

This murderous jealousy explains verse three in our scripture where Matthew says that when Herod heard the magi's report of the birth of a messiah, Herod was frightened, "and all Jerusalem with him." The people knew that of which Herod was capable. This background is why though outside of the Bible there is no account of Herod's slaughtering of the children of Bethlehem, it surely fits his personality and certainly could have been something he ordered.

So, Matthew's account is really a story of two kings. It is as much a secular as a theological statement. Note how Matthew sets the stage.

Herod has an army. Jesus has family.

Herod has the sword. Jesus has the Word of God.

Herod is crafty and cruel. Jesus is guileless.

Herod has money, fame, and power. Jesus was born in a stable in an obscure village to humble parents.

Matthew confronts us with the question: How does goodness survive the power and resources of evil? And, Matthew's answer is as important for us as it was his first readers.

Whether using the star, the scripture, or the magi's decision not to return to Herod, the reason for the survival of the Christ child, the survival of goodness, our survival in the midst of evil is that God is with us. God is working God's purpose out in the world. Yes, there are bad people out there. And yes, they do possess earthly power. And yes, goodness does threaten badness. Note that the religious leaders, the chief priests and scribes, readily provide Herod scriptural information, but display no fear or even interest in the baby Jesus.

Rather, it is Herod the ruler, the politician, the possessor of power who is frightened. And in that manner Herod was prophetic. The Romans did not realize that this one man, born in a forsaken area on the edge of their empire, crucified according to their laws by their soldiers, would become their biggest political challenge.

This story reminds us that if Jesus is king, as Matthew proclaims, then his reign is secular as well as sacred. Decisions made about the poor, the hungry, the sick, the homeless, are as much theological as they are political. Matthew wants us to know that this child raises up a kingdom without personal or religious boundaries. The life to which he calls us reaches into every aspect of our existences. It calls us to examine everything we do, say, and think in light of his life and teachings.

Yes, there is evil out there. But our God remains with us. And the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus assure us that the darkness will not overcome it.

If you ever journey to Mumbai, India, still called Bombay by many locals, I recommend that you stay at the Taj Mahal Hotel. As India's most famous hotel, if you reside in the old section, you feel transported back one hundred years to the time of the rajs and their British masters. Overlooking the Gateway to India, built to commemorate King George V's visit in 1911, the wide hallways, polished wood and brass, and antiques all evoke a sense of privileged colonialism.

But actually, the very opposite is true. When constructed over 100 years ago, legend has it that the ambitious industrialist Jamshedji Tata built it to avenge the whites only policy of Bombay's poshest hotel, Watson's.

Today, the Taj Mahal continues its policy of welcoming those of any color or race. But I was startled to discover that the Watson Hotel is also still in existence. But it no longer admits guests. In fact, when you drive by now you discover a shuttered, derelict building, symbolizing the ultimate failure of any policy which seeks to exclude or categorize people.

Matthew wants the story of Herod and the wise men to remind us that what looks strong and undefeatable now will only last if built on God's will and ways. In the end, evil cannot and will not overcome goodness. When all is said and done, Jesus will win.

“Where Is the Child?”

Today is Epiphany Sunday, a date set aside on the church's liturgical calendar to recall the visit of the magi to Jesus. It is placed there because there is a temptation to combine Matthew and Luke's Christmas stories. We do it all the time, even at church, the shepherds closely followed by the wise men. Actually, we think the wise men appeared up to two years after Jesus' birth. Plus, the emphasis are different. Luke has poor shepherds; Matthew features rich magi. Luke spotlights the angelic host; Matthew portrays evil Herod. Luke concentrates on those close by; Matthew proclaims the universality of Jesus.

But in their own way each account wants you and me to ask ourselves the same question, “Where is the child?” Where is the child in my life? And the gospel writer Matthew confronts us with the follow up question: Am I like the wise men or Herod? The wise men came to worship Christ, obediently seeking him and offering the best of their time, talent, and resources. Whereas Herod, saw the child as a threat to his priorities, his power, prestige and money.

This morning, as we begin a new year, both Herod and the wise men call you and me to look into our hearts, how we think, act, spend, and worship and ask ourselves the question, “Am I looking for Jesus in a magi way that will embrace and worship him, or like Herod to ensure he is not a threat to my time, my money, my life?”

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