

Sermon for January 6, 2020 – “What Gift Shall We Bring?”

Epiphany Sunday, Year A – Text(s): Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

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A boy wanted to be Joseph in the Sunday School pageant. He was cast as the innkeeper and objected but to no avail. When the pageant was presented he decided he'd have his revenge. Mary and Joseph knocked on the door and asked him if there was a room for them. The boy smiled and said, “Oh yeah, we have lots of room, “Come on in!”

The “wise men from the East” found in Matthew’s gospel are as familiar as any in the cast of characters that make up the mash-up we call “The Christmas Story.” And they join the shepherds and angels found only in Luke to populate children’s Christmas pageants everywhere, and goodness knows we love them don’t we? If nothing else they teach young people about an important bible story. In any case, this week’s reading of the visit of the magi is one with which we’re pretty familiar. Almost I’d say, to the point where it has little (if any) sense of drama/surprise anymore. However, I’ve found, as many of you know, that considering the political/historical context of the story brings nuances to the surface that pageants rarely mention. It breathes new life into this story, its theology, and most certainly its implications. The first thing that many Biblical scholars emphasize is that the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are different and contrary to our Christmas pageants. It does a disservice to the authors and their messages when we combine them. For example, Luke’s birth narrative ties into his emphasis on what scholars call the “Great Reversal”. For Luke, God works with the unexpected, especially the disenfranchised. Matthew, however, has a different perspective. He’s writing mainly to Jews and his birth story is all about politics. It portrays Jesus as a rival king who threatens the powers that be. When the magi come and worship Jesus they grant Him political legitimacy.

Matthew’s political story ties into the broader emphasis of his gospel as a whole. For Matthew, and remember he’s writing to a Jewish audience, Jesus is the new Moses. Here, Jesus isn’t destroying the Law but perfecting it. In Matthew’s gospel the problem isn’t that the Pharisees follow the law in all of its minutia, it’s that they don’t follow it well enough! Matthew’s portrait of the new Moses shows up as early as His birth story.

Herod plays the role of Pharaoh. Now, in real life, Herod was a very complex man. He was famous in the ancient world. He oversaw massive building projects which, of course, cemented his reputation and fame. However, massive building projects were really expensive, so everyone’s taxes went up which hit the poorest the hardest. Herod was obscenely obsessed with power and was extremely paranoid. He was also extremely brutal. He constantly guarded against threats to his power. In total, he reportedly killed 300 public officials, two of his sons, and one of his wives; all on the suspicion that they were plotting against him.

In view of all this the emperor Augustus reportedly quipped, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.” On some level his paranoia is understandable. After all, even though he was king it was only because the Romans had put him there. He had no royal heritage. In fact, though he was raised as a Jew he wasn’t really an ethnic Jew. His family only converted to Judaism just one generation before he took the throne. He was installed by the Roman senate not the Jewish people and certainly not by God. And as far as the other religious leaders, the text mentions the chief priests and scribes whose function was to maintain the hierarchical/colonial power structures of the Temple and of the Roman imperial rule. These leaders ultimately serve Herod and the Romans making sure things don’t get too out of hand.

The outsiders in this story are the “wise men” – the magi. Magi had a particular position in the Persian priestly class. They directly served the king, meaning they had ties to the political centers of power. We talked about this in Monday School in our discussion of the Book of Daniel. Generally speaking, they claimed supernatural knowledge through astrology. By many accounts magi were a deeply unsettling, strange class of people. We see some of this in the story of Simon the Magus in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (8:9-24). We find there that Simon boasted that he was someone great with people following him amazed for a long time by his sorcery. Until, of course, Peter and John show up.

For the most part, though, people kings especially harbored suspicions about them. They recognized that the magi in delivering a negative prophecy could be a threat to the royal apparatus. They couldn’t be trusted. Still, they had a mysterious appeal. The magi in our story were, of course, following a star. You see, ancient peoples believed that a star appeared in the night sky at one’s birth. The brighter the star the more important the person will be. Since the magi saw such a bright star they recognized that a new king had been born. The importance of this event made it worth it for them to make the long trek to find this new king. Now, this was precisely the thing that terrified Herod. This is why he slaughtered hundreds of his subjects, innocent new-born babies, to eliminate any royal contenders. The title “King of the Jews” Herod received from Rome when they’d placed on the throne. But in Matthew’s story we see Jesus gaining the title “King of the Jews” from members of a royal court. We see in Jesus’ birth the arrival of an “alternative” king, one truly different from the kings that’ve come before.

Herod is perched in his opulent, gaudy palace firmly located in the center of socio-political power. Jesus, by contrast, comes to a house or (in Luke a manger) in the backwater town of Bethlehem. Herod is infamous for his brutality and paranoia in keeping his status and power. While Jesus instead teaches the exact opposite. Jesus was all about downward mobility, voluntarily emptying oneself and taking on servanthood and the nonviolent use of power. So then, Matthew ends up narrating a story about several sketchy fortune-tellers dropping a bombshell on the king and those supporting him.

As I mentioned earlier this story echoes the story of the Exodus with Herod as Pharaoh and Jesus as Moses. And just as in Exodus what we see is a show-down between coercive, desperate, dictatorial power and God's benign, loving power mediated by a human. However, beyond the Exodus story the magi insist that Jesus is a new alternative King. They were right. Herod – like Pharaoh and eventually, Pilate was also right. He was right in that Jesus did indeed pose a threat to his rule. However, it wasn't what any of them, then or now, had expected. Jesus did not, nor would he **ever**, accommodate to the demands of empire. Empire demands total allegiance but Jesus' way refuses to give allegiance to anyone but God.

That's the compelling story that we find here, one we probably won't see depicted in any Christmas pageant. But, for those who may be weary of the inevitable kitsch of this rite of passage and maybe especially those who believe that the whole nativity story is just another quaint fairy tale or folklore that must be told and retold, there's something worth noting. And that something is how the story of the wise men in Matthew (and also of the shepherds and angels in Luke is rooted not in cuddly cuteness but in the politics of domination and costly resistance to it. The arrival of the magi in Jerusalem signaled an upsetting of political equilibrium or at least the **pretense** of it and called into question the rule of an insecure puppet king. Herod responded with murderous rage and the holy family found themselves as refugees on the run. Thus we find that the cutthroat politics that led to Jesus' death were amply present at His birth. Yet the star-followers from the East not only exposed a sham king and the political dangers of worshiping a hunted baby Messiah, they also as we well know brought gifts.

In O. Henry's famous short story, "The Gift of the Magi" we're told the story of Jim and Della. Jim sells his beloved pocket watch to buy combs for his wife Della so that she can comb her beautiful long hair. Arriving home, he finds that Della has cut her hair to buy a chain for his pocket watch. Now left with gifts that neither one can use they realize how far they were willing to go to show their love for each other and how **priceless** their love really is. Thus, Jim and Della, in their material poverty give each other the only gift possible: sacrificial love. The story's title makes clear that the Magi, too offered only one gift to the Christ child. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh may've meant many things; the holy child's own kingship, His eventual priesthood, and His inevitable death. But these wise ones seemed to know that this Jesus would be a different kind of king, a different kind of priest and that the difference **He** would make would lead to His death.

Their gift-giving is a summons to our own to make of our lives individually and corporately a witness of hope in and for a broken, despairing world; a reflection of how **priceless** God's love for us really is. Like the world into which Jesus was born ours is a world of political and economic oppression, of homelessness and forced emigration, of violence and fearmongering. To make a gift of our lives in such a world is to recognize the complexity of the story we tell, the paradoxes of a narrative that's at once tender and foreboding, sweet and savage, deeply humane and mercilessly brutal.

On the feast of the Epiphany we celebrate the fullness of the Christmas story. We make the seemingly foolish confession that tenderness triumphs, that love wins. We proclaim with Isaiah that our light has come and that our hearts overflow with this good news. The One who came to us in vulnerability amid scandal; to whom children pay homage in homemade costumes and coat-hanger halos in makeshift mangers. There, we discover something, something extraordinary. When we give ourselves away for His sake we discover something. We discover, as author Peter de Vries wrote, that...

Our gifts shall bring us home...

Not to beginnings...

Nor always to the destination named upon our setting forth.

Our gifts compel...

...master our ways...

...and lead us in the end...

...where we are most ourselves.

So what gift do WE bring?

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.