



Welcoming the Different – TouchPoint for 1/2/2019

Matthew 2:1-12 [NRSV]

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*‘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.’”*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

This coming Sunday is the Feast of the Epiphany—that time of year when we remember the visit of those mysterious characters who followed a star in order to find the young Jesus and worship Him! This is one of the most bizarre stories in the Bible, certainly the New Testament.

The scene is generally depicted as a visit from three wise men, but if we stick to the Biblical narrative, we are not told explicitly that these characters were wise, and we’re certainly not told that there were only three of them, though we are told that they brought three gifts. And they didn’t visit the manger. There is no manger in Matthew’s gospel. They came to Jesus’ home sometime in the 2 years following the birth. But none of that is really the point, well, except as I unfortunately learned, it was to my seminary professor who had me write a paper about this 35 years ago.

Anyway, what we do know about these mysterious characters is far more bizarre than what we don’t know. We know for a start that they were ‘*from the East*’ which most probably means that they were from Iran, or Persia, as it was then known. These people were foreign dignitaries from some Eastern empire. They were advisers to their king. They were probably eunuchs too, because when you were a man working in close proximity to the queen, well, the king had a special surgical procedure for you. So they looked different, dressed different, and spoke different.

They are odd and quirky-looking characters, these visitors from the East, but most importantly of all they are ‘*magi*’. They are magicians. They are star-gazers, astrologers, and experts in the arts of divination. This was all considered high science in that day so they were scientists as well.

They used their magical powers and scientific knowledge to serve their king and their government. So, from a Biblical perspective, these people were not only from the wrong country, wrong culture and wrong language-group, they are totally members of the wrong religion!

Here are a few biblical quotes about star gazers.

“Those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons predict what shall befall you. Behold, they are like stubble. The fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame.” (Isaiah 47:13 14)

And Jeremiah writes:

“Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are false.” (10:2-3)

This is not Biblical religion, people! They do not search for God in the right way. Their predictions are not to be relied upon or even listened to. These ‘magi’ are, from the Biblical point of view, superstitious pagan idolaters who are strangers to Biblical truth and not remotely part of the people of God.

So let’s be real clear on this. The Bible, and we can quote chapter and verse here, excludes them. Condemns them. Shuts them out. Perhaps a wall should have been built to keep them away! But the Divine, the Mystery, God—leads them to the Christ, and the home in which the Christ dwells welcomes them in.

I’m going to repeat that and let that sink in. The Bible excludes them. Condemns them. Shuts them out. But the Divine, the Mystery, God—leads them to the Christ, and the home in which the Christ dwells welcomes them in.

Hmmm, maybe there is a reason we call ourselves Christians and not Biblicans because they’re not necessarily one and the same, and following Jesus may mean not following the Bible. Hmm, maybe there is a difference between being a Christian church and a Bible church. Anyway, back to these pagan, heathen, God-forsaken foreigners!

They are led by God through their stars and their religion and their science. God spoke to them and met them *where they were at*. God spoke to them and met them in their symbols and mythology. And the home in which the Christ dwells welcomes them in.

We Christians are so fond of quoting John’s gospel where Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father but by me.” And we use that as a way to exclude others even though I believe that is a gross misrepresentation of that verse. But here’s a question for you, “Who or what leads one to the Christ?” This text seems to say it can be a foreign religion or science. It can even be your reading of the stars, your horoscope. Do I dare ask you to go home and read your horoscope to hear God’s leading? “God forbid” to quote Peter in another context.

This passage forces us to reconsider that quote from John from an inclusive point of view; to see it as saying “Whatever leads one to the Father, whatever leads one to the Divine, whatever puts one in touch with the Mystery, whatever does that is the Christ!”

The Christ is now defined by what the Christ does, which is to lead and connect us to the Father, the Divine, the Mystery. Whatever does that is the Christ! The Christ is not a title of exclusivity to be worshipped and glorified. Christ is a verb—not a noun. ‘Who led them?’ Who led them to join our incarnation celebration? God did! And that’s why they’re here.

God gave them a star, and they followed it, and they have just as much a right to be here as the rest of us!

Because the home in which the Christ dwells welcomes them in.

And then do you know what happened? Do you know what God did? God led them home. Led them back to their home country, back to their home religion, to their home way of discipling. Wow! I really don't know what to do with this.

Not only is it odd for them to be here, but they aren't even asked to stay and follow Jesus. They are led back home. Albeit by a different way than which they came, which when you think about it, is true for all of us. We all walk away from an encounter with the Christ in a different way than from how we approached.

I have to be honest, my view of God and who God is and how God reaches out to others is so tiny, so small, so minute—it is staggering. The God I meet in this story is so much bigger, larger, and inclusive, why it's almost a mystery how God works! Oh heck, it is a Mystery! God is a Mystery to me!

You know, I am sometimes asked by fellow Christians, "Do you believe all roads lead to God or only one road leads to God?" And my answer is "Neither, no roads lead to God." *God comes to us. God is Immanuel, 'God with us'.* All of us, ALL the time.

Or to paraphrase Jesus, "I am the road, the truth and the life." In other words, Jesus is saying, "Wherever there is truth, wherever there is life, wherever people are on the way, on the road, on their journey, there I AM."

And now, this passage is causing me to look at my Japanese missionary experience from a whole new perspective, and actually, a perspective that is a better description of what I went through. You see, I thought God was leading me through my faith to go to Japan to bring the Christ to the Japanese, where in reality, God was using my faith to lead me to meet the Christ in that different culture, society, and religious tradition. Maybe I wasn't Paul taking Christ to the pagan heathens; maybe I was a wise man; and yes, I am using that word loosely here; maybe I was a wise man being led by God to meet and *discover the Christ in others* who were very different from me. You know, I'm kind of getting tired of the gospel forcing me to think and view my life from a whole new and different perspective!

So this passage forces me to ask the question, "Who am I to limit who God reaches out to and how God reaches out to them?" Because the home in which the Christ dwells welcomes them in.

Look at the incarnation story from Luke and Matthew. The rich and the poor are there. Persons of different religions and races are there. And the home in which the Christ dwells, whether it be a stable, a manger, or house, welcomes them in. For our Christ is their Christ too. Our God is their God! Or as Paul says in Ephesians, *"...the Father, from whom every family...takes its name."*

Look, there is a part of me that is more than happy to faith journey with a group of like-minded, middle-class, respectable(?!) people like me, but the Mystery has other ideas. God gives us a grace of inclusiveness, which includes everybody, the rich, the poor, the educated, the uneducated, the likeable, the unlikeable, the strong, the struggling, the highly religious, the spiritual and not religious, and the not spiritual and not religious.

For the home in which the Christ dwells, welcomes them all and us. And the home in which the Christ dwells not only welcomes them and us, but invites us to sit down to supper with him.

So welcome: "Welcome to Christ's home, now come and eat."

Amen.