

Sermon: Year B, II Christmas

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Ephesians 1:3-14

Matthew 2:1-12

I routinely drive my wife and my daughters crazy whenever they recommend that I see a particular film. I drive them crazy because before they can finish their recommendation I always ask how the film ends – which is a request that they find both odd and out of place, as if knowing this would spoil the experience. For while I understand their desire to be pleasantly surprised by an ending they do not know ahead of time, I regularly insist that if the film is worthwhile I will be more richly surprised by observing the development that happens all along the way toward the destination I already know. But this is an argument I have not yet decisively won. If you are the kind of person who would agree with the rest of my family, you might want to cover your ears and mumble loudly to yourself for the next minute, because I am about to read to you the very end of the Gospel of Matthew, and I wouldn't want to unduly disappoint you so early in the season and in the telling of the story.

Jesus' very last words to his disciples were these: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, [I am with you always, even] to the close of the age." These are the words that Matthew wanted us to hear, more than all others, as an echo that repeats through every generation until the world in some manner comes to an end – which as Christians we believe will come not in collapse but in culmination. Jesus said, I am with you. Jesus was himself God with us. Emmanuel. This is the Good News, simply stated. And all that Matthew wrote in the twenty-eight chapters that preceded these two verses was intended to clarify and intensify the light of this proclamation of God to all of creation.

Time, like water washing over stones, has a way of smoothing out distinctions. Two thousand years of repetition has dulled Matthew's text in our minds. I think it is fair to say that for many the general presumption is that it has little new to say, and often we assume that the story it tells is exactly the one we already know, the nice one about Jesus coming to save us, or, if that seems a bit too extreme, at least the one that offers us a few bits of good advice, some decent instruction, and a number of insightful observations. It's a dreadfully slow novel, but a convenient reference book.

Tradition is a powerful force. Look at the crèche that is placed in front of the altar. It shares the same expression with crèches large and small across the globe: the humble piety of Mary and Joseph comfortably placed around a manger, with shepherds in quiet attendance, and beside them, quite unremarkably, a trio of wandering wise men, sometimes dressed as kings. We've grown accustomed to the scene, and thus, like so many other things in life, we see it without seeing it. They all seem so docile, these characters, each playing his or her own role. I can imagine someone stepping into the tableau, and in the habit of our own time, handing out individual certificates to everyone, awarding them for their participation. Good job! Well done! It's the effort that counts. Thanks for showing up! It's easy to love the Christmas story the way

we fashion it, because in this form it affords us a sense of benign kindness that is often missing in our day to day interactions. The story is sweet, but not startling.

Truth be told, however, this is not the story that Matthew tells. He has something far more radical to say, more disturbing than placating, and he launches into this from the very first verses of the first chapter of the Gospel. So here's a little topography of the beginning of the book. It's important, even if it's rarely actually read.

Matthew sets the birth of Jesus squarely within the expectations of Israel for the promised Messiah. He traces a genealogy from Abraham through David to Joseph, of the line of David. He marks the generations in groups of sevens, mimicking the Jewish cycle of common days and Sabbath days. Jesus begins the seventh cycle of seven, and Jewish readers would have immediately recognized that this signifies the day of Jubilee, a day set apart in the Mosaic Law when all the accumulated debts of the people were erased and slaves were set free, a day of complete redemption. Thus, the genealogy is perfectly formed – except that in numerous key spots Matthew breaks the traditional lineage by interjecting women in the place of men and foreigners in the place of Jews, and last, but certainly not least, he makes clear that Joseph himself did not father Jesus. He was born of Mary. And thus the message becomes deeply unsettling. Fulfillment is not a matter of bloodline or tribe or nation. Before the end of the very first chapter, all the Jewish expectations are overturned. The Messiah was not from Israel, for Israel. The Messiah was from God, through Israel, for the world.

This point was then all the more accentuated by Matthew's account of the wise men and their travels to Bethlehem. These were men of standing, learned and esteemed. They had easy access to kings and rulers. They obviously had no difficulty gaining an audience with Herod. And they, too, were foreigners, or, put a bit more rudely, they were pagans. To us, this tale of kings and sages is predominantly quaint. We no longer have a natural or substantial connection to the dynamics of this situation. We don't speak of pagans. We talk about alternative religions. Royalty is merely symbolic – it makes for a great tourist trade in England. Wisdom is whatever you find on the first page of a Google search. And after Star Wars and Batman, it doesn't seem at all incongruous to us that these characters would seek a baby in Bethlehem. We've flattened a lot of the world.

But in the first century, for Matthew's original readers, this tale would have been astounding. Kings claimed a divine right to rule. In a sense that is almost impossible for us to adequately understand, they literally embodied the nation. People were not citizens. They were subjects. And sages, while they may not have had the same power, shared the same mystique. They didn't merely express opinions. What they discerned, so it was claimed, was the movement and the revelation of the cosmos itself. They read the stars like books. Yet for those seeking the Messiah, this very practice would have been idolatrous speculation. They, in contrast, listened to God who spoke through prophets.

But Matthew grants to the sages the extraordinary place of being the ones who bring to fulfillment the words of the prophets. Their actions show who Jesus is. Matthew notes this very methodically. When God himself comes to Israel, it is pagans from the east who are given the

first privilege to come and see. And they, in turn, upsetting all expectations, offer gifts to this least of children.

And this enormous grace of God, of a love that suddenly seems to have no borders, is then matched in opposition by Herod, by a violence beyond comprehension. This is the part of the story we tend to dismiss as extraneous because it is so appalling: the slaughter of innocents, Herod's jealousy and fear directed against Bethlehem's children. We'd like to forget this or imagine that if we don't include it in the story we will avoid similar tragedies. Denial is so compelling. Yet Matthew insists that we face up to our own human inclinations. Wholesale redemption is threatening. It upends the delicate balances of power that we depend on politically, as a community. It's a grace we fear we can't afford, so, in the interest of some – whether the elite or the influential or the lucky – we concede that others, hopefully nameless, must, unfortunately, suffer. This is no more than sheer pragmatism, the inevitable struggle we share just as much today as long ago. How many innocent lives have been lost in our own world in the last week, in the season of Christmas – persons without names to us, people only distinguished by ethnic or national borders.

There was nothing benign about the wise men's journey. It strips away our pretensions, showing us who we are so that we can see all the more surprisingly who God is. Matthew is determined to rattle us from all sides, whether Jew or Gentile, ancient or modern. In the first several chapters of the Gospel he repeatedly breaks down the walls of our lazy religious assumptions so that when Jesus' ministry begins, with the Sermon on the Mount, we might be able to hear and imagine just how it can be that the poor in spirit are blessed and those who mourn will be comforted and the meek will inherit the earth and the pure in heart shall see God.

And in the same manner, the story of the wise men prepares the way for the last verses of the Gospel to ring resoundingly. God himself is with us, each of us and all of us. God is with us, regardless of our station, regardless of our distinctions and divisions, regardless of all the powers that hold sway and all the ways we foreshorten love by proclaiming the practical necessity of fear. God is with us, all the way to the end that God has fashioned and established in Jesus – of resurrection and redemption. Thus to us has been given the message of the angels for all the world. Fear not. Don't deal in fear. For God's sake, don't use my name to make others fearful. For God's name is this: I am with you, always.

Matthew noted that the wise men returned to their homes, but they went by another way – which wasn't just a footnote about men asking for directions. For them, the world had changed, how they perceived everything. And if we, too, read Matthew closely, the same possibility holds – that our unsettling will be profound, and our own world will be surprisingly opened to joy. “Lo,” said Jesus, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

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