

Catching Notice

Matthew 2:1-12

January 2, 2011

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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 wise men 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 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.

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The tree is still up, the candles have burned down low, and we have finally added the wise men to the nativity scene.

These are the waning days of Christmas.

Like many of you, I spent much of my time at home this Christmas filling my belly. And, like many of you, in this new year I have resolved to change my ways. To eat better, not as much, and with more purpose.

With ambitious goals such as these, one needs inspiration. I plan on finding mine through the talents of culinary wunderkids who create wholesome, healthy, and innovative dishes on a reality television show called *Top Chef*.

Top Chef is the kind of show I watch only because I have plausible deniability. Lindsey enjoys it, so I do my duty as her husband to watch it with her...for support, of course.

One technique that many contestants use on the show is a process called “deconstruction.” The chef takes a familiar dish - like, say, a chicken pot pie, or a Cobb salad - and separates the ingredients, serving them in a different way that helps the one eating appreciate the original dish.

With all of this in mind, in order to appreciate - even, savor - the familiar story we heard this morning from Matthew’s gospel, we are going to practice “deconstructing” the tale of the three wise men.

First, consider that the assumptions we have about this story could be misplaced. Those who visited Jesus were not necessarily three, not necessarily wise, and not necessarily men. Also, contrary to nativity scenes everywhere, they most certainly did not visit the stable (as Matthew tells us, they showed up a Mary and Joseph’s home).

Second, the magi clearly were not Jewish, and thus, not waiting for a savior. In fact, “the East” from whence they came was known as the land of the two great rivers...the land that we know as Iraq and Iran. These visitors were considered pagan by faithful Jews of Jesus’ time. They worshipped the stars and their own efforts at understanding the universe.

And yet, thirdly, when they finally arrived at the house where Jesus was, they did worship...not the star that led them there, but the child who had been born Messiah; the savior. There is much irony in this story; where the ultimate outsiders travel great distance to fall on their face and worship a God who was not their own, while the insiders (those within Israel, waiting on a savior) at best hardly notice God's presence, and at worst (in Herod's case), perceive the news as a threat to be exterminated.

Fourth, it is interesting to notice the order in which Matthew tells the story. The magi were guided by an object of their worship which they considered powerful and authoritative - a star. That star led them in a general direction toward Jerusalem and King Herod, but only that far. Remember that when they arrived at Herod's gate, the King summoned the religious authorities to consult the prophets to find where Jesus was to be born. It was scripture - the book we consider to be authoritative - that finally pointed the way. As a noted scholar observes, without the special revelation of God's word in scripture, the wise men would be lost.¹

Fifth, though they worshipped Jesus, there is no evidence or mention that these pagans from the East converted from their faith. We hear that the experience and journey had an impact (Matthew tells us "they were overwhelmed with joy..."), but the scripture is silent as to whether that impact changed their allegiance from their own God to the God of Israel.

Finally, it is curious that in a gospel like Matthew's that ends with Jesus sending all of those who follow him out into the world "to make disciples of all the Gentiles (or of all the nations)," the gospel begins with a story about a group of Gentiles who are the first ones to recognize the significance of the Christ child.

So there you have it...a deconstructed plate of "wise men."

What is there to appreciate? Well, I think this story says much to us as Christians who live in a world where those who practice different religions no longer travel from far away places, but live right down the street. I think taking a careful look at this story helps us learn how to live in a pluralistic world.

¹ Brunner, Fredrick Dale, *Matthew: The Christ Book*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans Press, 2004, p. 59.

Here are the stats: On a macro-level, we live in a world with about 2.1 billion Christians, 1.5 billion Muslims, a little over 1 billion of those who claim no religion, close to a billion Hindus, almost half a billion Buddhists, and a whole lot of other faiths who claim at least one million or more believers (including Jews, who number 14 million).²

Of course, you don't have to leave the city limits of Shreveport-Bossier to know that our demographics are changing; that the world is getting smaller; that the assumptions we used to make about our community - in general - claiming the same faith, are less true than they were 10-20 years ago.

And it is in a world such as this - against the backdrop of pluralism - that Christians proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord; that Jesus Christ is Truth; that Jesus Christ is the Son of the one true God. Even more, that God saves all people through faith in Jesus Christ. So the question is quite pertinent: How can we as Christians make this claim in a faithful and responsible way, given the reality of our world?

Some of us choose not to make this claim. We are embarrassed about it. Instead, we contend that all faiths - or at least the ones we choose to be "major" - are equally valid; that they take different paths to get to the same truth. While this might make us feel better about being inclusive and sensitive toward others of different faiths, it ignores much of Christian scripture and teaching which points towards Jesus Christ's exclusive claim on that truth.

Others of us answer the question in a more objective fashion by way of anthropology. Most people are what they are because of their upbringing - because of their culture. No sense in changing the equation for the sake of winning converts; it's best just to let it lie. The problem with this view is that it can cheapen faith to the point of being nothing more than a cultural by-product, and it fails to address the evangelical nature of what it means to be a Christian.

Still others have no problem proclaiming with confidence the exclusive nature of our faith. Christianity, they say, is the one true religion, and all other expressions are misguided and condemned. Some would assert that

² Statistics found at <http://www.adherents.com>. These statistics are from 2005, the most recent I could find.

it is the Christian's obligation to actively recruit and convert those of other faiths, while others believe their ignorance is somehow a result of their own sinfulness. This line of reasoning, often cloaked in scripture, can lead down the dangerous road of creating two kind of people: those who are like us, and those who are not; those who are valuable, and those who are expendable; those who are saved, and those who are damned...missing the fact that each person on the face of the globe is a child of God, and precious in God's sight.

Since these answers leave much to be desired, what if we could stake out a different claim? What if we could learn from scripture? What if we could think back to the story of those mysterious visitors from the East who first recognize the gift of the Christ child? What if, by our faithful - but not boastful - witness as a church, we could be a light that beckons those who have yet to know Christ, to come and see.

Recognizing that the light we hold forth is not our own, but a reflection of God's love.

Realizing that it is God who takes the initiative at turning hearts, instead of relying on our calculated efforts to either avoid conflict or to convert souls.

Trusting that our role in God's salvation history is not to render judgment, or establish criteria, or withhold compassion - but to welcome any and all who come in search of good news.

I have a friend who is pastor of a First Presbyterian Church in a small southern city. Last year he told me about a family of four that joined the church by being baptized. Originally, the family was from India, and until they decided to join Dan's church, they were practicing Hindus.

We consider it "normal" for people to join the church by transferring their letter of membership from another congregation, or to join by reaffirming the faith of their younger, more actively church-going years. It is quite a different thing to ask a person to profess their belief in the one Triune God and to follow as a disciple of Jesus Christ if a person must give up allegiances to another God or system of belief first.

My friend met with this family a couple of times before they joined. He wanted to make sure they understood the significance of this commitment, as well as the implications this decision would have on the faith they had known for many years; a faith that could still be appreciated, but that would, in a very real way, be left behind.

Also, he wanted to know what motivated them to seek the church; to seek Christianity. What my friend learned was that the family had been curious about the Christian faith – and had visited other churches around the area. Every experience they had left them cold because they were treated as visitors who were out of place. They visited Dan’s church because they were – get this – *invited* by an elder in the congregation who worked with the father of the family at the hospital. The church did not have a program of conversion; it did not dangle a carrot of salvation. It provided welcome, and created an environment where members could explore what it meant to follow Jesus – encouraging one another along the way.

Central to our faith is the belief that Jesus Christ is God’s one true light. Confessing this – *believing this* – even in this day and age, doesn’t have to be embarrassing, nor a reason to be arrogant.

As the so-called wise men show us, God can share that light with whomever God wants, however God wants, whenever God wants.

So let it shine.

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