

Strategies of Containment

Matthew 2:1-12

January 1, 2012

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 Judah; for so it is 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 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.

+++

As the pyrotechnic display of last night announced – it is a Happy New Year!

The gift of the New Year is that we get another chance. We can mark our last trip around the sun as history – celebrating what was good, putting behind us what was not so good – and we can look forward to the journey ahead.

Now, normally, I am not one for New Year’s resolutions. After repeatedly resolving to eat better, lose weight, exercise more, and slow down...I guess I am just tired of setting myself up for failure.

But this year, I do have a New Year’s resolution. It’s not for me – it is for us, as a church.

My New Year’s resolution is for our church to grow.

You might think that this kind of resolution is another unrealistic dream. In a time when the biggest increase in the faith community are the “spiritual but not religious” crowd, and in a time when more and more people view church membership as a thing of the past, “growing” may sound like a tall order.

But, truth be told, there are ways to grow. Sure-fire ways. There have been lots of books written about it. It goes something like this: Churches will grow if you control the demographic – catering to a specific kind of person or group. Churches will grow if you can build an environment where people always know what to expect – never wavering from the script. Churches will grow if you can create a culture of fear – where what will save you is found in here and what will harm you is found out there.

But when I talk about wanting to grow, this advice is not exactly what I have in mind. I’m sure it works, I’m just not so sure those ways of growing are really...well...Christian. And I don’t see much evidence of God working that way to grow the church within the body of scripture...

+++

Take today's reading. Before the Wise Men showed up in Jerusalem, the muckety mucks who were in charge of the membership rolls of the Temple had their affairs in good order.

They believed that the key to a good synagogue was by proper preservation. A preservation of the rules. A preservation of the tradition. A preservation of the standards for entry. By and large, this served them well. Things were predictable. People knew what to expect. The system worked.

The system worked for King Herod as well. King Herod, you see, was only a "King" in that the really important and powerful people in Rome allowed him to rule over the Jewish province called Judah. In reality, Herod was more a "client King" of Rome, and his power derived from keeping the people of Judah in line.

Enter the three wise men¹ who bring with them news that a new king of Jews had been born.

You can see the reason why Herod, along with all of the muckety-mucks in Jerusalem were afraid when they heard this news: for it meant the controlled system that gave them power and meaning was shifting under their feet.

For King Herod, the news was bad. After all, there could only be one king. This new child was a direct threat to his rule.

For the muckety-mucks, the news was bad. They were the experts when it came to matters of the faith. How could they have blanked on the dramatic development of the birth of a Messiah?

And on top of all of this was the hard-to-miss strangeness of the wise men themselves.

At least the way Matthew tells it in his gospel, the first people to recognize the birth of the king of the Jews were these outsiders – who were not Jewish, not within the system, and not supposed be privy to the things that God was doing in the world.

¹ Who may not have been wise, men, or three...but I digress...

For those in charge of the membership roles of the Temple, the conventional wisdom was that when God wanted to do something, they would be the first ones to get the memo and would then pass along the information to others who were in the fold. Imagine their surprise when these three exotic visitors – clearly outside the fold – shared with them this news!

+++

Fast forward with me in Matthew's gospel a little bit. You'll find it to be a case study which proves that when people feel threatened, they do irrational things.

After the Wise Men went back to their home by another way instead of sharing their experience with Herod, the King ordered the execution of all baby boys under the age of two living in Bethlehem.

Those muckety-mucks in the Temple (who are not to be confused with the religion of Judiasm, by the way)...those high-up religious authorities that somehow missed knowing about Jesus' birth – they spent the rest of Jesus' life plotting to do away with him, too. He was a threat – not just because he entered the scene without their knowledge, but also because he taught people to live out their faith in ways that went beyond the tightly woven boundaries of the religion that they had constructed and had in mind to preserve.

And what I find stunning is that the way that Matthew ends his telling of Jesus' story is just as remarkable as the way he begins it. The gospel begins with outsiders announcing the good news of Jesus. It ends with Jesus sending those who follow him to announce the good news to those on the outside.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the [outsiders], baptizing them in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...”

So, come on preacher...get to the point. Okay, here you go: One way to understand the story of the Three Wise Men is to read it as the first sign that what God did in the person of Jesus Christ cannot be contained and it cannot be controlled.

Not by the powerful whose authority is threatened by Jesus' life.

Not by the status-quo rule-makers whose systems depend of Jesus playing by those rules.

Not by the cynics in their short-sighted evaluation of Jesus' effectiveness as the savior of the world.

And not even by the church, and the ways that we – unknowingly, many times innocently – create obstacles for people to experience the life of faith.

+++

That's right. I said it! I do believe that sometimes the church gets in its own way when it comes to spreading the good news of the gospel.

Sometimes we can be a little too sure about what it looks like to be a follower of Jesus – not knowing what to do if people attracted to the faith fall outside of our categories and expectations.

Sometimes we structure our community, our practice of doing things, in ways that make it hard for people who aren't like us to participate in our ministry.

Sometimes we mistake the purpose of the church as being a community meant to meet and take care of our needs instead of as a place to discover how God wants to use us for the sake of the Kingdom.

Sometimes, instead of looking and acting like a church, we look and act a little too much like the rest of the world – not nearly diverse enough, much too partisan and sure of ourselves, and overly competitive.

But the great news is that God can work around and in spite of the ways that we might mess things up. The great news is that – ever since Jesus came into this world, from birth, to star, to cross, to tomb, to Spirit – the movement he started has grown to transform lives and communities. And it continues. Because as long as Jesus is alive and active in the world there will be more and more people caught up in the movement.

+++

All of this is why I have some measure of confidence in a New Year's resolution that our church will grow. Not because we follow the sure-fire

path suggested by church-growth experts, but because the message we proclaim – in word, deed, and attitude – points to the love of Jesus Christ.

And when we are clear about our goal in proclaiming that message, then God will add to our witness.

Maybe with new members.

Maybe with new partnerships in the neighborhood.

Maybe with a renewed sense of purpose.

And – to be certain – in ways that we cannot predict.

+++