

“When the Kings and Princes Are Home...”

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Matthew 2:1-12

January 16, 2011 (Belated Epiphany)

The Common Lectionary gives churches the option of celebrating Epiphany on either the first or the second Sunday in January. We're just being a little creative here at Circle of Mercy, celebrating it on the third—thanks to the deluge of snow that visited us last weekend.

Epiphany marks the close of the Advent and Christmas season. Many in this Circle were away on Christmas Eve, when we worshipped with St. Matthias Episcopal Church. So I want to start by sharing an image from Jim Abbot, the rector of that congregation, who offered the homily that night.

Jim invited us to engage in a little of what he called “sacred imagining.” He explained that he thought that what happened on the first Christmas might not be accurately represented by our Nativity sets. Most of our manger scenes include eight people—Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, two shepherds, and three Wise Men—sometimes an angel.

Jim reminded us that many people would have been on the move that first Christmas Eve. We know from the opening of the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke that, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered... And all went to their own town to be registered.”

“All the world,” the translation of a phrase referring to all who were under the thumb of the far-reaching Roman Empire, reflects the hubris of its leaders. Everyone had to participate in the Roman version of a census, conducted for purposes of taxation. That included Joseph and Mary, who had to travel from Nazareth, where they lived, to Bethlehem, the hometown of Joseph. It was a trip of about fifty miles, according to the map in the back of my Bible—a very long journey in those days, especially on foot or the back of a donkey.

Now, according to Jim Abbot, those with credit cards and cell phones—or whatever was the first-century equivalent—would have called ahead and reserved their rooms. But there must have been plenty of poor latecomers milling about, looking for a place to sleep that night. It's unlikely that Mary and Joseph were the first to be sent by the innkeeper out back to the barn.

When they knocked at the stable door, Jim imagined, it might have gone something like this. An older woman would have opened the door a crack, peered out, and said, “We're full. There's no more room in here.” After all, straw can spread only so far. But then she might have caught a closer glimpse of Mary and said, “Oh, honey, you're about to burst with that baby. Come on in, we'll *make* room!”

So it was the poor folk who first saw and the heard the good news of Jesus' birth. They were the ones up close. From there, the word spread out to the shepherds, who were gainfully employed, tending their flocks in the fields. They were a bit scruffy, but in first-century Palestine they were solid, middle-class folk. When they received the word from the angels, they went to Bethlehem “with haste” to see the baby.

We don't know exactly how long it took them to get there, but Luke tells us they were “in that region,” so we can assume that they were local folk who didn't have to walk far. When I was in the Middle East, I visited what is called Shepherd's Field, just outside the city limits of Bethlehem. But, of course, there may have been another labeled the same somewhere else, as multiple sites throughout the Holy Land claimed to be the place where Jesus was born or buried, where he preached or healed.

At any rate, it seems from the context that the shepherds arrived that same night, because the next verse after the news of their visit states that, “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise Jesus”—a ritual that took place eight days after birth. Wherever they came from, it seems pretty clear that the shepherds had to travel only a little way to participate in the good news.

Only Matthew of the Gospels tells the story of the visit of the magi, the wise ones from the East. These were men of privilege and power, summoned and consulted by a king. They were court priests, astrologers, sages believed to possess wisdom and mystical power. They had to undertake a long journey to be witnesses to Jesus' birth.

The timing of their visit is not entirely clear. Though they appear in our Nativity sets gathered with the others around the manger, Matthew says that they followed a star “until it stopped over the place where the child was.” And, “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother.” So we can assume that the new family had moved by then from the barn to a house of some sort.

The only other clue we have to the timing is in the next verses, the part that gets left out of the lectionary reading:

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled,
because they are no more."*

The timing is a little confusing, even to biblical scholars. One wonders if Herod was so dense that it took him two years to figure out that the wise men had tricked him and weren't coming back. But the important part is the tragic truth of what happened.

This is one story of the Christmas narrative I've had to completely relearn. I grew up with a warm picture of nicely dressed kings on friendly camels following a bright star and showing up with exotic gifts a day or two after Jesus' birth. Totally lost on me, and those who told me this story, was the political intrigue surrounding their visit and the birth itself.

Writing in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine says, Matthew "demonstrates concern for those removed from the political system by contrasting the disenfranchised with the elite, and by distinguishing those who stay put and remain complacent from those who are displaced or lack permanent homes. The literally well-placed 'Herod and all Jerusalem' are arrayed against the displaced holy family and the Gentile magi who travel to and from Bethlehem."

Here we have a young family on the move—first for the census registration, and then in flight to exile in Egypt to save their child from being killed—juxtaposed with a king sitting on his throne, issuing decrees. King Herod was "frightened," says Matthew, "and all Jerusalem with him"—meaning all those in power. He summoned all the chief priests and scribes, the men of political and spiritual standing, seeking their advice on what to do about this baby that threatened his ironclad rule. He used deceit with the magi, claiming to want to pay homage to Jesus when in fact he wanted to kill him. The wise men, having been warned in a dream, went home a different way. As much political intrigue here as in a Robert Ludlum spy novel.

Even the gifts of the wise men—at first glance highly inappropriate for a baby, whose parents might have appreciated some diapers or onesies—even these had political overtones. Gold represented wealth, while frankincense was used in worship and sacrifice, and myrrh for anointing (as a king) or embalming (as one whose death was already in view at his birth).

When Herod realized that the wise men had tricked him, he became "infuriated." He was a man with the power to back up his rage, ordering a massacre that left the mothers of Bethlehem bereft and beyond consolation. I'd like us to pause for just a moment and do a little "sacred imagining" of that scene. Imagine the birth of one child leading to the murder of all the children under two in Asheville and the surrounding counties. How could we bear it?

I've always appreciated that members of Jonah House in Baltimore—the community founded by Catholic peace movement pioneers Liz McAlister and the late Phil Berrigan—have journeyed to the Pentagon for a peace vigil every year during the days right after Christmas. There they make witness to Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents and remind us all of the threat under which all children live on this planet armed with nuclear weapons.

We know another story of a death decree, the slaughter of all male babies, and a "chosen one" saved in Egypt. This is also the story of Moses, who was first saved by the courage of the midwives Shiphrah and Puah, who refused Pharaoh's decree to kill the baby boys as they were born; then by his clever mother Jochebed, who set him afloat in a homemade basket, hidden among the bulrushes on the Nile River; and finally by Pharaoh's daughter, who took the infant Moses into her home. The circumstances around the birth of Jesus had political overtones for any Jew who knew the story of Moses, the first liberator of the Jews. We have rendered the Nativity bucolic and peaceful, when it is rife with political symbolism and intrigue.

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All week long we have heard about 9-year-old Christina Taylor Green, born on 9/11 four hours after the first plane hit New York's Twin Towers and among those gunned down on January 8th in Tucson. Christina liked ballet and was the only girl on her baseball team, the Pirates. She had a budding interest in politics, having just been elected to the student council of her elementary school. A neighbor took her that fateful day to meet her Congresswoman, Gabrielle Giffords.

But the world knew nothing about Donte Manning, also 9 years old, also dead from a gunshot. Donte was playing with his friends on a warm spring night in the inner-city Washington, DC, neighborhood where I lived, when he was the victim of a random drive-by shooting. Like Congresswoman Giffords, Donte was shot in the head. But the media didn't follow his progress, and only those closest to him knew when his family made the agonizing decision to withdraw his life support and let him go. Innumerable children like Donte escape the world's notice.

Debates are raging about whether the vitriolic and violent rhetoric in the air fueled the killing of Christina Taylor Green. I suspect there will be no definitive word, no conclusion to this argument. But we all know that Christina was born into a world where it is far too easy to build a bomb or purchase a semi-automatic Glock, the weapons that framed her brief life. The odds are even worse for children like Donte.

Former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin accused critics of her website—which featured sniper crosshairs over targeted congressional districts, including Gabrielle Giffords'—of “blood libel.” The term refers to the widespread rumor that Jews kill Christian children and use their blood in the making of matzos. It was one of the horrific lies that fueled the massacre of 1.5 million Jewish children during the Nazi Holocaust. We're not so far from first-century Bethlehem.

National tragedies—like the assassination of a president or a civil rights leader, the mayhem of a terrorist attack, or the shooting of a Congresswoman—tend to bring out both the worst and the best in us. We feel the shock and then scour around for the glimpses of heroism, briefly united in the sorrow and the poignancy.

Daniel Hernandez, the 20-year-old intern for Gabrielle Giffords for all of five days, rushed to her after the shooting and propped her against his chest to keep her breathing, keeping pressure on her wounds to staunch the bleeding. For just one moment, no one bothered to ask if Daniel Hernandez is here legally or illegally, or to care that he is gay. We just gave thanks that he was there.

We are a nation acquainted with such heroism, and with the tragedies that evoke it. Today we remember not only the three kings who heeded their dreams, but also Martin Luther King, a dreamer of dangerous dreams. We remember not only the children who were murdered in Bethlehem, but also four schoolgirls—Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Denise McNair—who were murdered in September 1963 by a bomb planted in Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. We remember them and all the children who faced down racism's water cannons and dogs in the Birmingham Children's Crusade, a turning point in the battle to end legal segregation in this country.

Dr. King's dream remains a future vision. Through the sacrifice of him, those four schoolgirls, and many others, we took a giant step toward it. But we know we're not there yet.

Like those ancient wise men, we need to keep following that bright star to the good news. The timing may be a bit of a challenge, but maybe we really all can meet at the manger: the uprooted and displaced ones on the move, the relatively secure ones, and the wealthy ones with gold and spices to bring.

**Those of us with power and privilege have the longest journey to take,
the farthest way to go to understand the good news.**

Those of us with power and privilege have the longest journey to take, the farthest way to go. The kings didn't just FedEx their gifts with a nice card, and we can't either. We need to show up and put our bodies alongside those who are most vulnerable. Maybe even shake things up a bit with the powers that be, like those magi who ignored the king and “went home by another road” in order to protect a child.

At the manger, we all kneel to honor the one who honors us all. At the manger, as with the events that bring us together in sorrow and hope, we become one—if only for a moment. That unity was the

dangerous dream of Martin Luther King. It will last beyond the moment only if we continue to pursue that dream.

Hear these words from Howard Thurman, the theologian whose work, particularly his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, greatly influenced Dr. King:

*When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people
To make music in the heart.*

Amen.