

## One Last Visit to the Manger

Matthew 2:1-12

Today's text is one about which we think we know all there is to know. The title of my sermon, "One Last Visit to the Manger," and some of the songs we sing today reflect much of what we think we know. Our image of the story is one of the three wise men, Melchior, king Persia; Gaspar, king of India; and Balthasar, king of Arabia arriving at about the same time the shepherds from the Luke narrative arrive, offering gifts to the baby Jesus sleeping peacefully among animals in a manger lined with straw as Mary and Joseph looked on serenely. There may even be a little drummer boy somewhere in your vision of this scene. You won't find much of this image in Matthew's gospel though. Upon closer study of this story it is even fair to wonder why Matthew would even include this event as part of his gospel. So let us look together with fresh eyes on this story, to see how it might bless us at Emory Church today.

Matthew is quick to give a specific time and place for the birth of Jesus. In Bethlehem of Judea, during the time of King Herod. Remember that Matthew starts his gospel with a genealogy of Jesus, from Abraham all the way to Joseph. In Matthew's eyes, Jesus has arrived to redeem Israel at this specific time and at this specific moment. Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. We're not told how many, or who they were. The assumption that it was three Magi comes from the fact that they brought with them three gifts. Their names are never mentioned. It is only church tradition that names them and makes them kings of great lands throughout the world. Their given title, Magi, makes them most likely astrologers and astronomers, because in those days the two professions were linked. Men such as these Magi spent their lives studying the

stars, because they held a firm view that everything that happened on earth would be reflected in the heavens. A great event on earth would be reflected with great changes in heaven. These Magi read the heavens and saw in them that the King of the Jews had been born and so they have come to pay homage to him.

As we study this first part of the story, I wonder, if a great event occurred, how would God get our attention today? Most of us here have lived our entire life in well-populated areas of the country, and the lights of the city have dulled the brilliance of the night sky and tall buildings have blocked our views of it. My wife Jana and I have recently become pet owners, and I was thinking about this part of the text as I walked our dog a few nights ago. It was a clear night, but I could only faintly make out the stars above me, so could God get my attention in the stars? Most of the time I don't even think to look up and ponder what the stars might say to me. Jana and I live a stone's throw away from I285 and spaghetti junction, so while outside we also hear the constant hum of traffic. Could God get my attention above the noise with an audible voice? I don't know. I can remember one instance in my life of being cut off from city lights and city noise. I was 15, and my Boy Scout troop spent a week living on sailboats in the Florida Keys, sailing from island to island, sight seeing and snorkeling and swimming. One night we anchored in the bay of a small, uninhabited island, away from all city light and city noise. I remember as we lay down to sleep on deck that night, it seemed as if the stars were brighter than I had ever seen them. The only noise was the breeze blowing gently across the water and the occasional small wave lapping against the hull of the boat. Perhaps the stars could have gotten my attention then.

But I know that God wants to get our attention even amidst the noise and interference of our lives. Most of us will not study the stars, so we must devote our lives to studying other things to hear the voice of God. It first means finding time to listen and watch without an agenda, as I was that night on the deck of a sailboat. It means studying the Bible and participating in a community of faith, believing just as the magi did that God wants to tell us about the new things happening for the Kingdom of God for the world today. It means listening to that still, small voice inside of us that we might call the Holy Spirit, for it's prompting and nudging. Make no mistake about it, God still has lots to tell us, if only we will study and listen.

So back to the narrative, having heard from God, the Magi arrive in Jerusalem seeking to find the one born as king of the Jews. Again, we don't know much about them, but we know their arrival and their quest had all of Jerusalem talking. King Herod had to be greatly upset by all of this. You must understand, that to be the person Rome sent to Jerusalem to rule over Judea was being given perhaps the toughest assignment in the Roman Empire. Judea was a backwater province and the Jews were a strange people. Jews and their steadfast belief in one god instead of the Roman pantheon of Gods. Constantly claiming to be the chosen people of that one god, claiming that they should be free on the land God had given them. Always searching for a messiah, always on the verge of another zealot rebellion that the army would have to put down. To be the Roman ruler of this place and these strange people was often a losing proposition.

So when Herod is told that men of great importance were searching for the new King of the Jews, he saw only another potential rebellion that would have to put down.

He inquires of the priests and scribes, and they quote the prophet Micah, who had spoken words of hope to the downtrodden of Judea many years before. The ruler will be born in Bethlehem, one who will be the shepherd of Israel. Herod is no fool here. If he can find this new ruler before the Jews do, he can put down a future rebellion before it even begins. He convinces the Magi that he is just as devout as they are, telling them to carefully search for the child, and after they find him, come back to him and tell him where the child is, so that Herod too may go and worship the new ruler.

I confess that I love this part of the text. I think it's because I see the visit of the Magi before Herod as God firing a warning shot across the bow of the mighty Roman Empire and all subsequent earthly rulers. Herod will not even be the ruler 30 years later when Jesus is put to death by the Roman Empire, so why did he have to be told of the birth of this new King? Why did the Magi need to even stop in Jerusalem? Couldn't the star have led them around the city and its authorities? We don't know what the Magi may have known about the authority and power of the Roman Empire, but we know that they arrive and ask matter-of-factly where to find the one who has been born King of the Jews. In their mind there is no doubt that a great ruler has been born. For the Magi it was written in the stars, and the witness of creation trumps any nation's earthly decree. God seems to be telling Rome that that even their rule fall short of the rule of the Kingdom of God. A few hundred years later Rome will even become the first nation to attempt to use the cross as a symbol of their nation's power and might. But earthly empires will fall, no matter how much they claim the cross of Jesus as part of their heritage. This part of the text reminds us that no matter where we are or what things

seem to rule over us, there is a greater Kingdom that we all belong to, the Kingdom of God.

The Magi do make it to Bethlehem and find Joseph, Mary and Jesus in a house. Again, there is no mention of a stable or a manger, which kind of ruins the nativity scene most of us have at home of kings next to shepherds and friendly animals. They offer the gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh. All of these gifts were common for royal tribute during the time of Jesus. Gold was the ultimate symbol of monarchy, frankincense was a holy perfume used in the sanctuary of worship. Myrrh was oil used by the high priest for anointing, and also a burial spice. Matthew uses the gifts to tell us a little about whom this child Jesus is meant to be. But here is where I have to ask the question that strikes me most in this entire epiphany story; What are these three foreign Magi even doing here? Let me explain.

The gospel of Matthew, many of you many know, is considered to be the most Jewish of the four gospels. He opens his gospel by tracing the line of Jesus through the great King David all the way back to father Abraham. He interprets the birth of Jesus not as a beginning of a new thing but as the fulfillment of all that God has been doing in the world. The prophets such as Isaiah and Micah have foretold all of this. The Psalms have sung the praises of the messiah even before he arrived. And yet Matthew tells of wise foreigners coming and paying tribute to Jesus. It isn't even Matthew, but rather Luke, who tells the story of Jesus being celebrated at the temple by devout Jews who have waited for the messiah. So again I ask, what is this doing in the Gospel of Matthew?

In my first semester of seminary when I learned about all the different methods that are used to critique the biblical text, one that was most interesting to me was called the principle of embarrassment. The principle of embarrassment is used when trying to determine whether or not something is part of the original story, or a later addition done to sort of clean the story up, make it more palatable, ect... The basic rule is that the more out of place a part of a text or narrative seems to be, the more likely it is that it was part of the earliest text or narrative. Because otherwise, the original authors or later editors may have been tempted to eliminate the embarrassing part of the story to make the whole thing sound more believable. So using that test, I have to believe that the visit of the Magi really did happen, because why else would Matthew, our most Jewish gospel writer, allow the first tribute to the new messiah to come from three foreigners?

Matthew's message to his audience, and for us today, is that this new king is meant to be more than just a King of the Jews. Jesus is meant to be ruler over all peoples, both Jew and Gentile, chosen people and foreigners. All nations will pay tribute to him, and he will liberate the oppressed no matter what their genetic background. What a shocking thing for Matthew to tell his audience. What an exciting thing for God to be doing both 2000 years ago in Bethlehem and today here at Emory Church. Matthew is telling his audience, both then and now, that God is always at work, doing new things that we would never expect. Who knows what God may tell us to do next, if only we will listen and study the signs, just as the Magi studied the signs? Who knows how we might live if we understand that because of the coming of Jesus, our true citizenship lies in the Kingdom of God, just as the Magi warned the Roman Empire 2000

years ago? I ask these questions to both myself and Emory Church today, for the glory of God both in this place and throughout the world.

Amen?