

Unusual Messengers

I'm glad to see you all here this morning. As you may know or have heard by now, many American Christians are using Christmas as an excuse to skip church services this morning. Writing for the *Wall Street Journal*, David Gibson says, "Nearly 10% of Protestant churches will be closed on Christmas Sunday this year, according to LifeWay Research, and most pastors who are opening up say they expect far fewer people than on other Sundays. Other reports suggest that churches across the board are scaling down their services in anticipation of fewer worshippers." Commenting on this trend for Associated Baptist Press, Brett Younger, the associate professor of preaching at McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, asks, "When did we decide that the purpose of worship is to draw a crowd? Attendance at the first Christmas was not big, but God decided to go ahead with it, anyway."

It really is ironic, when you think about it. Christmas, after all, is a slurred form of "Christ's Mass," a Christian worship service specifically dedicated to worshipping the one who was born this day in Bethlehem of Judaea. The word "mass" comes to us from the final words of the old Latin rite used by the Church in worship for centuries: "Ite, missa est" ("Go; it is the dismissal"). Pope Benedict XVI, the heir to that great Latin tradition, points out that there is something going on here besides a simple sending out of people to go home after worship: "In antiquity, *missa* simply meant 'dismissal'. In Christian usage, however, it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word 'dismissal' has come to imply a 'mission'. These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church." To celebrate Christmas, then, not only implies a special worship of Christ on this day but also a special attention to the mission of Jesus.

And isn't this, in our tradition, a good part of the reason that we gather on the first day of the week? We come for fellowship, certainly, to see the friends we love and to encourage each other. We come to worship God in a special way – joining our voices and spirits together in song and in prayer on the day of the week on which Jesus was resurrected, claiming the promises of God that this universe-changing event has meaning and import to *our* lives as well as that of the Crucified One. And we come to learn more about the mission and Way of Jesus – about how we are to live our lives differently from others so that we can make a difference in the world, joining our Loving Creator in the ongoing work of creation, the healing of the world and all who are in it. We gather together on this day and every time we come to this place or to other houses of worship or in place where we go to serve God by serving God's people because we are different from the world, called out, and we intend to be so.

We are different, called out, as I said, to take the message of God's Good News out into the world, the message of God's great love for all and how that love was made manifest in a tiny child in a humble home in the little town of Bethlehem. In this way, we are not unlike some of the characters in the well-known stories I just read: the shepherds and the wise men. I want to take a quick look at those two groups this morning and think about who they were, who they weren't, how they are similar to us and how they are different.

Let's begin with the shepherds. In the history of the Chosen People and their neighbors, shepherding had been an honorable profession. The shared memories and lore of the residents of that part of the world would have told them that there was a time when their families had primarily been herders. As Deuteronomy 26:5 puts it, "My father was a wandering Aramean." In light of the care with which shepherds tended their flocks, ancient kings liked to describe

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themselves as the shepherds of their people. Israel's greatest king, David, was the living embodiment of this ideal – the shepherd boy grown up to be king. It is to him that Jews and Christians have traditionally ascribed the words of Psalm 23: Yahweh is my shepherd. The picture of a shepherd connoted care, kindness and faithfulness.

But the reality, by the time of Jesus, was changing or had changed. Rabbinic literature from shortly after Jesus' lifetime contains five lists of professions considered "unclean" or disreputable. Shepherds made three of these five lists. Various theories as to why have been offered. Perhaps too many of them were like Jesus' story of the hirelings, prone to leave their flock at the first sign of danger because the sheep didn't really belong to them and given to stealing animals for their own use for the same reason. Or perhaps, if they were hirelings, they were seen as representatives of the wealthy folks for whom they worked and therefore as accomplices when that wealth was ill-gotten. Or maybe it was because sheep grazed on public, shared land and, as the cattlemen of the American West complained, messed the land up for other uses. Why is not certain but by the time of Jesus, shepherds were well on the way from being icons of God's love to being an undesirable element.

So the shepherds on the hills of Judaea on that special night needed to hear the reassurance of the angel for a couple of reasons. First, of course, was the fear they must have felt at the sudden appearance of a messenger from God, complete with radiant glory, and then the veritable host of heaven, singing and praising God. Imagine being out in the middle of the country on a night so dark you could see a million stars and then having a light brighter than anything you'd ever seen shining on you, long before the invention of electricity or the wonder-numbing frequency of movie special effects. I think I'd be pretty shook up. But second was the angel's message to them. The Messiah had been born, the descendant of David, the long-awaited king! And they were supposed to go into the village, where they weren't particularly welcome anyway, and greet this king. Them, the simple shepherds! They must have thought they would be laughed at or driven away or worse. The only king they might have had experience of, remember, was Herod the Great, well-known for a violent and bloody temper.

But the angel had good news for them: "you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." This was no king wrapped in satin and furs, seated on a golden throne, but a child like one of their own, wrapped up in simple cloth and kept safe in an ordinary home in the scooped-out floor trough used to feed the animals. This Messiah was one of them; this Messiah was born to take their side.

As so often with the Word of God, I find both comfort and challenge in this story of the shepherds. I am comforted by the idea that God calls and uses ordinary people to further the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community to which we are dedicated. I hope that idea comforts everyone here, because while all of us are unique and special in our own ways, we are not among the rich or the powerful. None of us are celebrities or public figures. Good Shepherd Baptist Church is rather like those shepherds of Bethlehem – ordinary people in an insignificant town. But I am also challenged because I am reminded that God uses for God's world-changing purposes people that most other people look down on. And so I have to ask myself, who are the marginal ones in our society? The homeless, the feeble, the troubled, the addicted? Who is God using to bring a message that I'm not hearing because I discount the messenger? Is it people

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whose politics I don't like, whose theology I find wanting, who simply make me nervous for one reason or another? Who are the shepherds in our society and how is God using them in ways we are not perceiving?

At first glance, the visitors to the Christ Child in our other story for this morning are entirely different from the humble shepherds. In some traditions, they are honored as kings, although there is no support for this in Matthew's narrative. But they are at least astrologers, the combination of magicians and scientists of their day, come from far away Persia, what we now know as Iran. Well, maybe and maybe not. Let's see if modern scholarship will help us get a fresh look at who these men are and what they said. Perhaps they have more in common with the shepherds than we might think.

Kenneth E. Bailey makes some important points about the Magi in his book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, which I've referenced several times in the last few weeks. His first point is one I think most of us have heard before: when the travelers say they've seen the new king's star "in the East," they don't mean to the east of the starting point of their travels. To have followed a star east of Persia would have meant ending up in India or China, where as far as we know, Christ did not come as a child. Many commentators suggest understanding the travelers' words as meaning that they saw the star while they were in the east but Bailey has another suggestion. If we translate Matthew's Greek back into the Aramaic or Hebrew in which the story was likely first told, we find a word that means either "east" or "rising." This is why the New Revised Standard Version translates their statement as "we observed his star at its rising," which makes much more sense to the story as we understand it.

Bailey also calls into question the traditional origin of the travelers. While it is true that "μαγοι" or magi was used by the Greek-speaking world of the first century to refer to wise men from Persia, Bailey believes they may have come a far shorter distance. The narrative says that these wise men come "from the east." That could mean very different things to different people. Connie and I continue to be amused by the idea that to folks around here, "back east" could mean Boise or Denver, two cities very definitely located in the Western United States. Growing up as we did in the very middle of the country, "back east" refers to the Eastern Seaboard states in most references or maybe Ohio. To us, Indiana and Illinois are as much a part of the Midwest as Nebraska or Kansas. There is, of course, East St. Louis, which is both a quick drive and a whole culture away from the St. Louis County suburbs of our childhoods, but that's another topic for another day.

It may well be that whoever put the Gospel according to Matthew in final form associated "the East" with Persia, as most cosmopolitan Greek-speakers would do and therefore hung the title of "Magi" on these wise men from "the East." But what if those who told the story at first, the simple villagers of Bethlehem, meant somewhere less removed from their frame of reference. To them, anything east of the Jordan was "the East." In fact, that is how residents of Israel and Palestine use the phrase today. The "Magi" may have never seen Persia at all. Instead, they may have been from Arabia. They brought the child gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is mined in Arabia and in many other places in the world, but frankincense and myrrh are harvested only from trees that grow in southern Arabia. Additionally, we have evidence from the Early Church that the wise men were Arabs rather than Persians. Writing around 160 A.D., Justin

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Martyr, a Palestinian Christian from Caesarea, specifically says, “The wise men came from Arabia,” an assertion he repeats five times in his “Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew.” As a kind of clincher for this theory, Bailey cites the field work of a British scholar in the 1920s, E.F.F. Bishop. Bishop visited with a Bedouin tribe in Jordan who were called *al-Kokabani*. In Arabic, this means “Those who study/follow the planets.” Bishop was told that the tribe’s name came from their ancestor’s study of the planets and that they had traveled west in ancient times to honor the Muslim prophet, Issa. We, of course, know him by his Latinized name: Jesus.

Now, this may seem like a pretty obscure, if mildly interesting, point to chase on this Christmas Sunday but it reminds me of a couple of things. When we consider the current state of misunderstanding, distrust and outright war between the Christian West and the Muslim East, we need to remember that the clash is far more about cultures than it is about faith. Our Muslim brothers and sisters do not worship Jesus as the Second Person of the Trinity but they do hold him in high esteem as a prophet of Allah. If this were not true, it would hardly be possible that the tradition of the *al-Kokabani* would have been preserved or repeated to foreigners. If the divide between Islamic and (nominally) Christian cultures was really about religion, it would be a point of shame for an Arab tribe to be linked with the founder of Christianity. But the Holy Koran praises both Jesus and Mary and calls for good relations between followers of Islam and the other “People of the Book,” Jews and Christians. In the providence of God, the three Abrahamic religions are linked at the cradle of Bethlehem: Mary, Joseph and Jesus, good Jews all; the future followers of Jesus who became known as Christians; and the descendants of the Wise Men, who followed a servant of God from their own nation in submission or Islam.

The other thing that occurs to me as I consider the witness of the Wise Men, the astrologers of Arabia, is that they like the shepherds were beyond the pale of normal society in Bethlehem. They were outsiders, foreigners, bound to be viewed with suspicion and possibly hostility. It reminds me that even in the twenty-first century, we continue to allow foreign languages and accents, different cultures and ways of doing things, to stand as barriers between neighbors. When I ran for Lynnwood City Council four years ago and went door-to-door on my campaign, I had more than one person tell me that they were concerned about their city because so many of “those people” had moved in. “I don’t know how to talk to my neighbors,” I was told. “They just don’t understand how things are done around here,” another concerned citizen said. Differences can be scary. But we Christians have an advantage here, don’t we? We know that in their own languages and with their own styles, many of these foreign folk worship the same God as we do, most of those praising Jesus in ways we could understand if we listened carefully. In Christ, as Paul taught us, there is neither Jew nor Greek. We know not to be afraid, don’t we?

On Friday, just as I was preparing to write this sermon, a friend of mine posted a cartoon on Facebook. It was titled, “Where Are the Important People?” It showed a traditional scene of the stable in Bethlehem, with Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus, camels, Wise Men and shepherds. Arrows pointed to the camels and sheep; “animals,” it said. Others pointed to the shepherds: “unclean.” The Wise Men’s arrows said, “foreigners.” And the arrows pointing to the Holy Family proclaimed “nobodies.” And in the eyes of the world, that’s exactly what the drawing portrayed. But the eyes of faith see something quite different. We might label those arrows quite differently. The animals: God’s Beautiful Creatures; the shepherds: Our Brothers; the Wise Men: Our Beloved Neighbors; Mary and Joseph: God’s Faithful Servants. And how do we label

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that baby in the manger, the one whose birthday we celebrate today? Son of God, Christ our Lord, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace... the list goes on and on.

And where are the important people? All of those in the cartoon, surely. And here, in this place, too. We are important because we share the *missa*, the God-given mission of the shepherds and the Wise Men. We, too, are called to praise God who has made these things happen, to praise the one who lay in that manger and most importantly, to make known what has been told us about this child, and what we have seen and heard and experienced in our own lives. On that night in Bethlehem, a baby was born who changed everything, who brought God's love and great joy to all people. Let's go tell.