First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

1/7/24

A Different Perspective

Matthew 2:1-12

**2**In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi, from the East, came to Jerusalem, **2**asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” “For we observed his star in the East and have come to pay him homage.” **3**When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, **4**and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5**They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

**6**

 ‘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.’ ”

**7**Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8**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.” **9**When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10**When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11**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. **12**And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

When I was younger, I absolutely loved the story of the Three Wisemen, or as my siblings and I used to refer to them, the three wise guys. I loved the idea of three kings in all their fancy clothes making the trek across the desert to bring gifts to the newborn Christ child. Since I was 6 feet tall by the time I was 12 years old, every year for the church Christmas pageant, I got to be one of those Wisemen, and those moments are some of my fondest memories. By the way, I’ve only become taller as I’ve gotten older, and if you think I’m really tall now, you should see me in my cowboy boots :-)

The story of the Maji, is only found in the writings of Matthew, which I find interesting because, as I’ve mentioned before, Matthew’s audience was primarily Jewish and Matthew’s goal was to convince the Jewish people that Jesus was indeed the long awaited Messiah.

So, the recording of this event seems a bit out of character, given Matthew’s focus on the genealogy and lineage of Jesus. That said, there are some interesting things that we need to consider when reading these 11 short verses.

While this story has captured the imaginations of Christians for centuries, we really don’t know much about the Maji, if truth be told. Matthew simply doesn’t give us much information beyond the basics, so speculation has run rampant about who these men were.

What we do know, is that these men, and our lack of knowledge has led us to assume that they were only men, are foreigners and practitioners of a different faith; they most definitely were not Jewish. The word “Maji,” can be translated as “Astrologer,” and the practice of astrology would have been considered evil by the Jewish people.

Their arrival in Jerusalem must have caused quite a stir, especially since they immediately began asking about the location of the child who born to be the King of the Jews. For these men to leave the comfort of their homes, and everything they knew, to follow a star; undertaking a journey that must have lasted at least a year all the while not knowing where it would lead, is pretty remarkable, when you think about it. All of this to pay homage to the Christ Child.

Now, contrast this with Herod’s reaction. He’s heard the rumors of the arrival of the Maji in Jerusalem, and their quest for the King of the Jews. This frightens him, because it’s a threat to his political power. Remember, Herod was a puppet ruler; a Jew placed in his position by the Roman occupation, and not at all beloved by the common folk who saw him as a collaborator with a cruel and oppressive regime. Herod’s fear is understandable, because any perceived threat to his authority would have caused him enormous anxiety and would have had to be dealt with in the harshest possible manner.

So he summons the Chief Priests and Scribes and asks them where the Messiah was to be born. The response is, of course, that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea, as had been prophesied in Micah.

Not, I suspect, what Herod wanted to hear. He then secretly summons the Maji and learned from them when the star had appeared. One thing to note here; the secret summons probably had more to do with Herod’s concern about his reputation, as it would not have looked good to the religious leadership if it was discovered that he was associating with Astrologers.

Now, here’s where it gets interesting. Herod knew about Micah’s prophecy, and yet he chose not believe that the prophecy had actually been fulfilled, because to acknowledge it, would have meant the loss of his position and power. The fact that these non-Jewish foreigners believed that a prophecy made by a prophet of a different faith had been fulfilled and they were ready, willing and able to worship, in their words, the King of the Jews, must have only made matters worse for Herod.

We, of course, know the rest of the story and the horrible events that follow, so how do we make this relevant in our modern day context?

I believe that Matthew’s point in recording this event is that the saving grace of the long awaited Messiah was meant for all peoples, not just the people of Israel. Kathleen Ruston, a New Zealand nun, writes that in telling the story of the Maji, *“Matthew is highlighting that all do not come to Jesus by the same way. God uses unexpected means. This sets up what recurs in Matthew — Jesus, Israel’s King, is recognized and welcomed by the least expected people.”*

God uses unexpected means. That phrase really resonates with me, because it draws attention to the fact that even before Jesus’ earthly ministry, God was working through the least expected people; people who were foreigners and non-believers, people whose religious practices were outside the norm.

So, consider this; Do we practice what we claim to believe? Are we open to hearing the message of love for others, the message of humility in our actions, the message of mercy for the least of these which stands at the core of the Gospel; are we able to accept this message from non-Christians? Or do we dismiss the messenger simply because they don’t profess a belief in the risen Christ. According to Matthew, it was God who led the Maji to the Christ child. And it was God who showed them Herod’s hypocrisy. If that’s the case, where does that leave us?

When our own words fail to line up with our actions, is it possible that God will use unexpected means, and the least expected of messengers, to point out the disconnect between words and actions? Is it possible to hear the message of the Gospel from non-believers? And, if the core message of the Gospel can be proclaimed by non-Christians, as I believe, are we willing to put aside any sense of superiority that we might have and actually humble ourselves enough to hear the message, regardless of who the messenger might be?

The disconnect between words and actions has caused great harm to the church. And, honestly, that harm is a self-inflicted wound. People are leaving the church in droves, simply because they see what many Christians are saying as not being reflected in their actions. This self-inflicted wound is only compounded when we refuse to acknowledge the fact that God can, does, and will work in and through outsiders.

The old hymn tells us that *God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to preform.* Open your hearts and minds to the mysterious ways that God is working through the least expected circumstances and may we always remain open to the fact that God is calling us to hear the message of the Gospel, proclaimed by the least expected of people. May it always be so. AMEN