

Jan 4 – Epiphany Close Encounters

Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate Epiphany with its symbol of the coming of the wise men. Images of children in velvet robes, gold colored crowns upon their heads, carrying boxes and jars spray-painted gold or silver with glitter and fake gem stones glued all over the gifts robs us of the challenges and wonder of this day.

Usually, I try to not combine the birth stories of Matthew and Luke. Each was written independently and meant to stand on their own. We harmonize them in our pageants and nativity sets but the truth is that the wise men and the shepherds did not witness the birth together. But for a few moments I believe it helps to listen to parts of these stories together to hear a greater truth.

The truth is that God is so determined to proclaim the “good news of great joy for *all* the people” which is what the angel in Luke says is the meaning of his message and the purpose of the birth, that God reaches beyond fields in the region around Bethlehem to “the East.” God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared witless by God’s glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to a king. All along the way, God directs the wise men, first by a star, then via a verse from Micah, and finally in their dreams.

God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to wise men via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God’s own people in Jerusalem through these same visitors from the East. Epiphany is about a message to all people, a message that can be upsetting, as we will see.

Who were these wise ones? While Christian tradition holds that they were kings, a more precise description might be that the wise men belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science. So these Wise Ones from the East were scientists and practiced other

religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to Bethlehem. More ironic, God used scientists who practiced other religions to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people in on the news that their Messiah had been born. It is a shocking story when you really think about it in this way.

Move that idea to our day and age. Is it saying that God could use an Islamic trained scientist to open our eyes to the work of God? Perhaps? It does challenge our ideas of who is in and who is out in God's great scheme of love and redemption. It challenges what we accept and reject when it comes to science. Shocking, isn't it. And it doesn't end there. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, in Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace. This is part of the meaning of those words first spoken by the angel, a message to "all."

God's radical grace is wondrously frightening. I experience a bit of a shudder as I think of the implications of portraying the wise men as scientists who practiced another religion, because to do so pushes me to expand my understanding of both the ways God reaches out to people to announce good news in and through Christ and what it means for individuals to have faith and for gatherings of the faithful to be the church.

As someone who holds on to favorite, cherished ways that God works to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith, it's always wondrously frightening to realize anew that God's own work of embracing all people is more "mystery" than "formula," because God's ways are always bigger than my understanding. This idea is not comfortable. We want clean lines of demarcation so we can label and assign people to categories. We want to know who is in and who is out and this story of "all and mystery" challenges that. I almost want to reject it.

But then I think of the alternative which, of course, is to join Herod in not seeing God's ever-expanding embrace, or feeling threatened by it. Instead of being challenged to expand my understanding I then give way to just plain fear: Remember what Matthew

reports: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). Herod jealously reacted by violently trying to protect his place and preserve his power. Unfortunately, we see this played out way too often in the name of religion to this day.

As I reflect on this I remember the lines of a poem: by Edwin Markham:

“He drew a circle that shut me out-

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle and took him in!”

And so the stage is set at the beginning of another year. We have the conflict between God’s ever expanding embrace and our need to protect and preserve.

The wise men’s journey tells us three things: The first of these is what we have been talking about. We need to err on the side of openness and inclusion instead of exclusion. Too often the church has put itself in the role of gatekeeper. We think it is our job to decide who is saved, what is correct belief and action with the resulting flip side that whatever doesn’t meet our criteria is outside the bounds of God’s love and the working of God’s will. The story of the wise ones shows how wrong our definitions are. The chief priest of the people of Israel, God’s chosen, did not see or understand the meaning of the star in the sky. Zoroastrian priests had to fill them in. They were the ones drawing the bigger circle. So whatever you want to shut out, exclude, God says I am at work in them and through them.

Both birth narratives share the news that God came to earth and was born as a baby who is called Jesus. Wise ones in Matthew and shepherds in Luke find the child and celebrate the good news of God with us. This is a reminder that our God loves us and can identify with our struggles and our pain. Jesus was fully human and so knew all the feelings we know, dealt with all the issues we deal with and such. So it is a reminder that God wants us to bring all of our lives and hopes and dreams, mistakes and fears to God. God understands and loves and forgives.

The wise ones remind us that God isn't afraid of our questions. The shepherds met the in-breaking of God as seen in the angels with fear, the wise men with observation and deliberation before action. These were the scientists of their day. They would not have set off on a journey of such significance without checking their facts and consulting. God used their inquiring minds to move them to Bethlehem. Too often people are afraid to question God. They think that others will see it as a sign that they are not faithful or rejecting their faith. God can handle our questions. We don't always get an answer such as why our alert and active loved one dies and another lives, or exists in a bed unaware of life. Some feel they should not ask the why question or to admit they are angry. I tell them go ahead and tell God what is on your heart. God can take it. God understands. Questions and emotions are part of what it means to be human and that is part of the message of this day.

So we are challenged to embrace all and to see how God is at work in all people. It is a challenging and scary thought but the wise men ask us to journey with them.