

“A Seeker’s Stance”

Matthew 2:1-12

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Epiphany Sunday

January 8, 2023

While watching the Republican members of the House of Representatives try to elect a Majority Leader for the twelfth time on Friday, that age old definition of insanity came to mind. Doing the same thing and expecting a different result. The party that has built its brand of late on the idea that government is incapable of doing anything seems to be imploding on its own philosophy. But this kind of “doing the same thing and expecting a different result” insanity, extends far beyond a political party. You can see it in a string of Baltimore Mayoral Administrations, each of whom has tried to eliminate some of the 15,000 abandoned properties that plague our neighborhoods. Project 5000, Vacants to Value, Project CORE - seemingly different attempts to change our city with the same insufficient structure and inadequate resources to actually make the changes that are needed. You can see it in our nation’s inability to create any meaningful changes in the proliferation of guns - I wrote that sentence just before a 6 year old boy shot his teacher in Virginia on Friday. You can even see it in the most recent catastrophic football injury that has been in our public consciousness of late. All the padding in the world isn’t going to change the reality that when grown men hit each other repeatedly, eventually someone’s going to get seriously hurt.

Yet noticing this definition of insanity repeatedly at play can also create an opposite sort of problem within all of us - the cynical problem of believing that nothing can change. The cynical belief that since some are obviously motivated only by what’s in it for them, then *everyone* must be. The cynical idea that because this current political party is plagued by the inability to govern, then all must be. The cynical belief that since Baltimore hasn’t been able to get rid of its vacants in the last 30 years, or stem the killing that takes place each week that it can’t ever make those changes. The cynical conviction that since gun legislation failed after Sandy Hook that it will never pass or that since football is inherently dangerous then we shouldn’t even try to make it safer for those who put on the uniform.

The trouble with cynicism is not what it does to the people who are already in it only for themselves, but what it does to the rest of us. Robbing us of our hope, and with it, our agency.

Herod is obviously only in it for himself. The contemporary Pharaoh, as Gretchen pointed out last week - digging up that old Pharaonic playbook which every dictator inherits. Crush all opposition, kill your enemies, anticipate new ones and cut them down before they can harm you, even children. I know the common contemporary

idea about dictators is that they enjoy terrorizing others, but Matthew's Gospel makes a different kind of claim. Because maintaining power is their only concern they are always consumed by the fear of losing it. There's a threat around every corner, a potential enemy cloaked in every friend. People like that live always in fear. Herod's terrorizing brings little enjoyment, only temporary relief from one threat that will always be replaced by another. His story is a warning to those who are seduced into thinking that power alone can give us the life we want. Matthew doesn't want us to be like Herod.

The chief priests and the scribes serve as a different kind of warning - exposing that dangerous myth that knowledge always leads to what is good. The chief priests and scribes have a kind of knowledge that the magi do not have. They know the scriptures - the prophecies that give them special insight into the rise of the Messiah. The Magi come to Jerusalem, thinking that Jerusalem is the obvious place for any king - the capital city, the place of the temple, the home of the inside-the-beltway urban elites and all the power that comes with it. The Messiah must be born there among the usual suspects. But the chief priests and scribes know better - Bethlehem, the small town 9 miles south of Jerusalem - that is where the Messiah is to be born - in the city of David. The chief priests and the scribes know all of this and yet they use their knowledge not to lead them to their true king but to assist Herod with his malevolent motives.

As a Jewish follower of Jesus, Matthew wanted to argue that many of his own religious leaders colluded too much with the interests of their Roman occupiers. And more specifically, that even knowledge of their own scriptures was not enough to lead them to worship Jesus. The actual history during Jesus' day and later in Matthew's time is more complicated than that. But his essential argument that just because religious leaders know more about their own tradition does not mean they are more inclined to do the right thing holds true today. And just because science can generate new knowledge does not mean that knowledge will automatically be used for the common good. Just because you know something more doesn't automatically mean you are going to do more good than someone else. Another warning from the text. Matthew doesn't want us to be like the religious leaders he critiques.

Matthew wants us to be wary of Herod and power-hungry pharaohs like him, wary of religious leaders and anyone who has knowledge but isn't guided by it in the just ways Matthew envisions. Matthew wants us to be more like the magi. Now if you were in Jack Hodges' Advent class I think you might join me in wagering that Jack would be very happy with the way we have handled the magi today. We haven't called them kings because the text doesn't call them kings. We haven't called them wise men because the text doesn't tell us their genders - so our gender-bending hymn was more accurate than the original.¹ We didn't call them by the names Caspar, Melchior, and

¹ On this Sunday we changed the words of "We Three Kings" to "We Three Magi of Orient Are. . ." and the three soloists who were in costume did not all identify as male.

Balthasar - those were names that people added later. And the only reason we got the idea there were three magi is because there are three gifts named in the text.

All of those descriptors are distractions from who the magi were. Even some of our modern-day scholarship in my mind is also a distraction from who they are for Matthew and for us. We don't need to pin down their country of origin or even their specific brand of astrology. What Matthew wants us to see is that the magi were seekers. They were seekers who used their knowledge to lead them toward this most recent revelation of the God they longed to worship. What they knowledge they had, they used to lead them toward greater understanding in service of what is good. What they didn't yet know they were eager to learn. The Magi were seekers and as the new year rolls around I've been thinking a lot about what it means to occupy a seeker's stance. What it means to be confident in what you know without pretending that you know more than what you do. I've been contemplating how to maintain that stance in a time when the world seems full of Herods who are only out for themselves, but also full of cynics who think that because Herods are real, then their own efforts to try to do good, or be good don't matter.

It seems to me that to be like the magi you have to be willing to be on the move a bit - to remain unsettled in the world as you find it. To keep yourself from choosing sides too quickly, preventing yourself from giving your allegiance to what another claims is absolutely true too firmly. There is a kind of openness, grounded in goodness, that I admire in the magi and want to try to aspire to myself.

In the Christian tradition those magi came to represent the revelation of the God of Israel to the Gentiles through Jesus. It's hard to imagine but in Matthew's time, the God of Israel was exactly that - the God of and for Israel alone. Non-jews were sort of irrelevant and some might argue still are pretty irrelevant from inside the Jewish tradition today. In the magi, Matthew saw a significant expansion that the apostle Paul had already meditated on extensively. The promise that was made all the way to Abraham - that through him Israel would become a light to all people - that promise was being realized in Jesus the Jew.²

The trouble today is that a lot of those Christian Gentile descendents act more like Herod and his religious pawns than the magi. Christians who use their knowledge of their own tradition in the service of unilateral power. Christians who use the power of their privilege in this country to oppress others not to share their light. Christians who are so convinced they have the truth that they'd miss God if she showed up in a stranger, or the hungry, or thirsty, or naked or poor. Sometimes I'm afraid I'd miss God,

² It's important to make clear that neither Paul nor Matthew are making a supersessionist argument - the heresy that gives religion fuel to anti-Semitism, among other things. Paul's vision is that the covenant made with the Jews is not abrogated but expanded to include Gentiles. Matthew was lodging an internal critique from within the Jewish faith. He did not imagine that his words might be used by later Christians to condemn Judaism wholesale or argue that Christians were a kind of "new Israel." That argument is alien to the text and needs to be condemned consistently.

too, as hard hearted as I've become on some days, convinced that there's not much more than power than corrupts, or leaders caught in insanity loops, or human beings closed to possibility.

On Epiphany rather than viewing God's revelation only as an historic event to a people who are most of our ancestors, I wonder what it would mean to view it as the enduring truth that God can always be found by those who wish to find him - regardless of their IQ, regardless of their nationality, or their gender or their religious affiliation. This is a God who wants to be found by seekers open to truth that there is much more to life than the will to power over others, there is much more that is possible for those who believe that God is present in the world, there is much more awe and love and grace and freedom available to anyone curious enough to move from the settled stances they occupy to seek what more can be found.

The magi were seekers which doesn't mean they were politically naive, or unsophisticated about the world in which they traveled. They knew what Herod was up to. They were savvy enough to go home by another road. But somehow they didn't let their experience of people doing terrible things eliminate their belief that God could be found. They continued to seek God until they found Jesus and with him, great joy, something that Herod and his religious experts likely never found.

As you put away your Christmas decorations for the season, you might want to keep your magi close by. Don't let Herod or his religious experts rob you of your hope. Don't let him steal from you your joy. Be like the magi, on the move in search of hope and love and joy that can be found.