

1 Sermon, January 5, 2014

Texts: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: the Magi"

1. The Magi are only minor players in the story
2. We know very little about them
3. What they do tell us about is the working of God
4. God's love cannot come about by Herod's methods of planning and scheming
5. God's love cannot come about without some sacrifice
6. God's love comes from where you least expect it, sometimes

1. The Magi are only minor players in the story

January 6, each year, is the feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of the coming of the wise men, or magi.

The magi are somewhat mysterious figures. We know very little about them. We know that they came "from the East," which is pretty vague.

Two and a half centuries ago, John Wesley wrote about them:

"Probably they were Gentile philosophers, who, through the Divine assistance, had improved their knowledge of nature, as a means of leading to the knowledge of the one true God. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose, that God had favoured them with some extraordinary revelations of himself, as he did Melchisedec, Job, and several others, who were not of the family of Abraham...."

In all the biblical story, there few more minor roles. They don't say anything, they don't do much except open their treasure chests and present gifts, and pay their respects to the infant Jesus.

About 500 years ago, the German reformer Martin Luther wrote about the magi:

These wise men are usually called the three Kings. As not much depends on this, we will grant this opinion to the simple-minded people. However, it is not known whether there were two, three or more. But they certainly came from the rich country Arabia or Sheba, which is evident from their gifts, that is, gold, frankincense and myrrh. All three of these are very precious in that country. It ... is customary in these Eastern countries to do homage and make presents of the choice fruits and wealth of the country...

3. What they do tell us about is the working of God

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Martin Luther admits that the details of the story of the magi are not really important. It doesn't matter how many there were, or how they presented their gifts.

Instead, what is important is what these magi tell us about the working of God. And we're told about the working of God not only through the actions of the magi, but also through the negative example of King Herod.

4. God's love cannot come about by Herod's methods of planning and scheming

Herod the King was a cruel and manipulative man. He executed several of his sons out of fear that they might revolt against him, and even had his wife, Mariamne, executed.

Herod taxed the people heavily, and built huge palaces for himself, along with many other great buildings. Two of his palaces he built as fortresses in fear of his own subjects.

In the Bible, we read that Herod received the Magi as guests, and when they asked where they might find the infant king, Herod became afraid. He became afraid that here was a threat to his power; a baby born who might end his own dynasty. So Herod ordered all the male children under two killed in the area around Bethlehem.

Herod, with his scheming could not prevent the coming of the messiah. Herod's great power did not prevent God's working.

God's grace instead came through some foreigners who were willing to listen to the message they received from God's creation.

The story of the magi tells us that God's grace comes about when people listen, not to their own self-interest, as Herod did, but listen to a greater message.

5. God's love cannot come about without some sacrifice

The story of the magi also tells us that God's grace cannot come about except through some degree of sacrifice.

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Herod did not know the meaning of sacrifice. It was all about me, me, me.

The magi, on the other hand, were willing to take months out of their lives in pursuit of something greater. They were willing to spend money on lavish gifts. They were willing to travel to unfamiliar places. These magi accepted that they must sacrifice something of themselves for something sacred.

The Bible and the history of Christian faith is a history of those who have made sacrifices. Jesus said, "foxes have holes, the birds have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

The Apostle Paul wrote:

"To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;" 1 Corinthians 4:11, 12, NRSV.

Jesus said, in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."
Matthew 5:11, 12, NRSV.

Through Christian history, Christians have come to expect a degree of sacrifice, a spending of one's own self in love and labor, if one is to be faithful.

You may have heard of Oseola McCarty, an African-American woman from Mississippi who died in 1999 at the age of 91. She had never been married, but had worked most of her life as a washerwoman, taking in people's clothing and boiling the clothing in her backyard in a big black kettle. She worked hard, and saved over \$250,000 in her lifetime. She gave 10% of her estate to her church, and ten percent each to her three cousins. The remaining 60% she gave to the University of Southern Mississippi, for scholarships for African-American students who otherwise couldn't go to college.

When her gift became known, over 600 others gave to the school and increased the size of the scholarship so that the endowment now has about \$700,000.

Certainly Oseola McCarty could have spent this money on herself. She would have been more comfortable, or better entertained. But she wanted something greater for others.

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The story of the Magi tells us that God's love demands a sacrifice of our own will and effort and resources for God's greater glory.

6. God's love comes from where you least expect it, sometimes

The story of the Magi is a minor part of the story of the love of God.

But there is one more thing about this story that echoes the rest of scripture. God's love sometimes comes from where you least expect it.

The recognition of the new-born Jesus didn't come from the priests, or from King Herod, or from community leaders or opinion makers. The recognition of the infant Christ came from foreigners; Non-Judean foreigners.

The ones who came to see Jesus were not the Biblical scholars, but the astrologers. How unexpected!

Matthew's gospel tells us that this and that happened in order to fulfill the scripture. But the ones who came to Jesus didn't *know* the scripture.

Over and over we find that God's love and blessing comes unexpected and from places where we would never look.

Thanks be to God, who keeps surprising us with blessings that we never would expect.

Amen.

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