

Going Home by a Different Road

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, January 6, 2019

Government is in a shut-down with almost \$800.000 federal employees and countless other people affected. We are at a political stand-off over whether or not to pay billions of dollars for the expansion of a wall on the southern border. Different political visions about immigration, national identity and security as well as effective control of drug trafficking are clashing. Politicians are trying to look and act strong for their so called base while we are watching something akin to a game of chicken. I have to admit that more than anything else, this all primarily reminds me of how much our world needs a change in consciousness about who and whose we are. I believe this is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which consistently challenges our societal, political and religious paradigms. Today's text is no exception.

We hear about the action of the established Jewish king, Herod the Great, desperate to secure his power at the news of Jesus' birth no matter what the cost. Herod owed his title to the Roman Emperor who ultimately remained in charge.¹ Herod primarily serves as a foil or contrast to the innocent infant king to be, Jesus. In other words, the destructiveness at the heart of Herod's dominative power brings to light the transformative and life-giving power of Jesus who embodies the Christ, the incarnate presence of God. It is a fitting text for the Feast of Epiphany, which we celebrate today. The Greek word *epiphanein* means, "to make manifest", or "to bring to light". On Epiphany we celebrate and bring to light how God is making the hope, needs, and future of the world manifest in Jesus as the Christ.

¹ Herod was of the Herodian lineage of Greek origin and preferred by Rome to the native Jewish Hasmonians. The Hasmonians had led a successful rebellion against the Greek-Macedonian Seleucids in 165 BCE who were ruling the area back in the day. Although the Romans were now in power, what occupier would like to have Jewish nationalist troublemakers in charge?

The Gentile wise people from the East manifest the expansiveness of God's inclusive vision.² They serve several roles in the context of the Gospel story. They are the typical outsiders who openly affirm the identity of the Christ child in contrast to the insiders who reject the good news that is coming to them. For the writer Matthew, their presence echoes the vision of Isaiah 60:1-6 which predicts not only a return of the Israelites from exile in Isaiah's time but proclaims that the realm of God will bring true peace and justice to the whole world. This was a radical and conscious shift away from presuming an exclusive covenant between God and the nation of Israel. Perhaps someday, we will live into an inclusive vision that can celebrate God's power alive beyond nationality and religious identity.

As we return to our text, I am struck by how humorously naïve or 'Three Stooges like' (though their number is not given) these wise people are at first. After following their star a long way, they waltz right into the capital of Jerusalem to ask where the new King of the Jews has been born, oblivious to the fact that the current king may not like the idea of a replacement. The text tells us that Herod was frightened at the news "and all of Jerusalem with him." "All of Jerusalem" is likely a reference to all the political and religious power brokers and pawns who depended on Rome and Herod for their livelihood. They represent the military-industrial-- , add religious, - complex of his day afraid to have their prosperous transactional collective apple cart upended.

Herod gets all his advisors together for an emergency briefing about what the tradition has to say about such a birth. Bethlehem is identified as the birthplace linking the story again to the expected Messiah from King David's lineage, not Herod's. So Herod plays charmer boy with the sole intent of manipulating the wise people into becoming his informants who will unwittingly lead him to the child he wants dead. Oblivious at first, they follow the star directly to Jesus and his parents. They are overcome by joy and not

² They may have originally been conceived as Persian sages and astrologers (note that they are not called kings in the story), perhaps of the priestly class. As such, they might have served as advisors to kings by interpreting dreams and predicting how the stars would impact human affairs.

taken aback by the fact that the supposed king is in a stable surrounded by farm animals rather than a palace, that his parents are not dressed like royalty, and no one is serving up a fancy banquet. Their open heartedness and capacity for wonder allows them to see beyond convention and regard this child as worthy of the highly symbolic gifts they have brought.

Like the people mentioned in Isaiah, the wise people bring gold and frankincense. Gold represents beauty, durability, and royalty. Frankincense is a resin from Arabia used to make expensive perfumes and anointing oils for festive occasions. Some people also revered it for its healing qualities. The wise people also bring a third gift: myrrh, an expensive resin and perfume used for beauty treatments and to purify corpses. Thus, these gifts represent Jesus' special (royal) status, the durability of all he stands for and portend his eventual death on the cross as "King of the Jews."

In other words, amidst this joy we can already sense the danger of what awaits this true king. He will never turn to manipulation or use force to secure his power. His life will be rich with healing transformative love and compassion, blessed with courage to speak truth to power with love, anointed with integrity, beautiful in its love for the excluded, bold in modeling a changed consciousness. Jesus as the Christ will live out his identity as a beloved child of God whose love must include even his enemies because he recognizes in all children of God his sister and brother. And he will ask all who follow him to see Christ in every one they meet. This requires a changed consciousness, a letting of our little ego projects and attachments and a grafting on to the vine of Christ to bear fruit. It is nothing short of an evolution into a new life that first feels like death (and for some has meant physical death as well). Our story for today reminds us that growing into such love involves suffering but we also know of capacity for resurrection.

Like the wise people, we face the question of whether we will recognize Christ as our healer king or collude with Herod or Cesar and all they represent. We are always in

danger of becoming pawns in a game of powerful manipulation to preserve power for power's sake. Corporations are monopolizing power, financial oversight is endangered, too many politicians try to frighten us into reactivity mode and can become pawns themselves as campaign donations and greed influence policy decisions. We must remain alert and, yet, we must remain rooted in Christ's inclusive love, remembering that there is a Herod in all of us when we get frightened and dig in to preserve our perceived little kingdoms.

The wise people get some help in their discernment. They are gifted by a dream that reveals the true danger represented by Herod. They resolve not to return to him and leave for their own country "by a different road." However, Herod eventually resorts to killing all male children two years of age and younger, hoping to kill the Christ child among them. As happens so often, innocents are the ones who suffer. Meanwhile Jesus' family flees to Egypt, placing the holy family squarely in the company of every family that is fleeing war, persecution, manipulative and corrupt power in our own day.

The story of wise people can remind us that we find God in the unexpected and vulnerable places of our world. In our story, God becomes manifest in the small, endangered, unrecognized or underprivileged children of our world bursting with gifts and talents to be developed. We, too, can pray for an opening of our hearts and minds that will guide us on our journey home to God, to each other, and ourselves, "by a different road." We may well have to look to the children and our love for them, and not only for our "own" children, to guide us into a life that is truly life-giving and sustainable for the many and not just the few. Let us also remember that God is manifest in those who are present to others during times of crisis, transition or new birth. God is in the Maries and Josephs and wise people of this world who attend to new birth and foster new life beyond boundaries and conventions. May God's Spirit help us to grow in love. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.