



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

PAGANS AT THE PARTY

January 6, 2013

Matthew 2.1-12

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

*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.*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child and 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

In his usual inimitable style of comparing biblical texts to the idiosyncrasies of church life, Garrison Keillor writes about the Magi in *Life among the Lutherans*. He conjectures that the Magi, being the only non-Jewish players in this drama of Jesus' birth, must have been Lutherans because they brought myrrh, which everyone knows, he says, is "a sort of casserole made from hamburger and macaroni." Before they departed on their long journey, says Keillor, the wife of one of the Magi probably said: "Here, take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish."

(John Buchanan, *The Christian Century* editorial, December 26, 2012)

Keillor's humor is a way of de-sentimentalizing the story, a way to avoid trivializing it, a way to view it from another angle so as to keep it focused on its intended purpose. For though it should be taken seriously, there is something about the story that doesn't ring true when taken literally. First of all, stars are too far removed from earth to "stop and stand at the place where the child was." Secondly, if the angel of the Lord warned these magi in a dream not to return to Herod, why didn't

the angel give them directions to find Jesus without going to Herod in the first place? It would have saved the lives of hundreds of babies he killed to make sure he got this potential rival, this child who would be king. Thirdly, the notion that three gifts equates to three magi limits the possibility of a multitude of these earthly hosts praising God in their ecstasy that this child portends for pagans like themselves.

Tradition and convenience have created manger scenes with shepherds and wise men, angels and animals and heavenly hosts attending the birth but as I'm sure you're aware, Matthew's story knows nothing about shepherds and Hallelujah choruses. His story is brief without any of the details: there's a pregnant Mary, a Joseph who's visited by an angel and a simple mention of the birth and the name to be given to the child. Sometime later, perhaps up to two years, these magi, perhaps Zoroastrians, come upon the scene. These first people to worship Jesus in this version of the story are about as far from being Jews as one could get. "Outsiders, pagans extraordinaire," as James Sledge puts it. And that is the vital focus of the story.

(From a sermon "Pagans at the Party" January 06 2011. *The Christian Century* online archives)

Epiphany, as we know this day, Three Kings Day, the day following the 12th day of Christmas, is a relative minor event for most Christians in the United States. The economic and emotional crash that follows the hype that leads up to December 25 is an exercise in exchanging gifts, tearing down the decorations and getting back to the gym after the weeks of gluttony and overindulgence. But in many parts of the world, Epiphany is the main event for Christians. In liturgy, song and gift-giving, Christians in other cultures of our world mark the arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi, gift bearers to the Christ Child as a most significant facet of the event.

To be sure, these stargazers, these astrologers from the East are the most exotic characters in the Christian story, inspiring literature and art, from O. Henry's short story "Gift of the Magi" where the poor young woman sells her prized long hair to get enough money to buy her husband a fob for his prized gold watch he inherited from his grandfather. And, unbeknown to her, he sells his watch to buy her an assortment of expensive combs for her hair. Their gifts to each other, obtained at great cost by selling what they treasured most are more valuable to the other than the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the Magi whose generosity inspired the sacrifice of the man and woman.

These three astrologers were the source of inspiration for T.S. Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi" and immortalized in Barbara Robinson's classic story *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* where the kings, played against character by the most misbehaved, recalcitrant children in town. Leroy, Claude and Ollie Herdmann, who can't keep their crowns from falling down over their eyes eschew the exotic gifts of the Magi in favor of something more practical and sacrificial on their part: the Christmas ham that had been given them in their food basket from the church. It was the only thing they'd ever given away, except knocks on the head.

Artists, authors, poets and playwrights demythologize these Magi. That these non-Jews, these Gentiles, these foreigners from the modern-day countries of Iran, Iraq or Saudi Arabia, were placed front and center in this ancient story compels us to take seriously their role in our contemporary story, where the importance of world peace and our own country's foreign policy with these nations could not be more crucial.

Matthew paints the picture of a Jesus who, from the beginning of his life, shatters religious tradition by attracting outsiders—pagans, astrologers—to the inside. By the time Jesus is dead, he will have also shattered the boundaries of race, class and gender, inviting to the table the poor, the prostitutes, the lepers and the Roman centurions, all of whom were kept by society and religion on the outside. The coming of the Magi portends a story of radical inclusivity that threatened Herod and frightened all of Jerusalem. The coming of the Magi exposes those who dared to define who was in and who was out. And the star of Bethlehem still beckons us to be part of the story in our own world.

Antithetical to the story last week of the woman who pushed a man to his death in front of a train because she thought him to be a Muslim, John Buchanan writes about a rather significant event that happened five years ago in the weeks before Christmas. A letter was written to Christian leaders by 138 Muslim clerics and scholars representing every branch of Islam. “A Common Word Between Us” stated that the peace of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians, and that love for God and neighbor is a central tenet of both religions and common ground on which we stand. “Our eternal souls are at stake,” the Islamic leaders wrote.

(from a sermon entitled Christmastide, December 25, 2007)

And there is an encouraging word about the increasingly multifaith constituency of our upcoming 113th Congress of the United States which will be the most religiously diverse in the history of our nation. The majority, made up of Protestants and Catholics, will be joined by a significant number of Jews, three Buddhists, two Muslims, a Hindu and a self-described secularist. This richness in diversity is as priceless as the gifts the Magi brought to the babe in Bethlehem.

(David Gibson, RNS. *The Christian Century*, December 26, 2012)

On this day of Epiphany, this first Sunday of a new year, the Christ who presides at this communion table invites us to join as one body in being renewed in commitment to channel the perseverance and presence of the Magi. We, too, are pagans at the party, one and all. It is our common lot, if our piety will allow us to step down from our lofty places of religious privilege, to realize we are all part of the same humanity to whom God came as a child. We are all invited and all welcomed to the table of community, that in eating and drinking in this New Year we will be fortified in our resolve toward peace. It is an invitation not to those who have figured things out but to those willing to journey together as people of unconditional love and inclusion.

Poet W. H. Auden, when speaking about the Magi in his poem “For the Time Being” offers us the invitation to this table, this year, this life of faith.

Music and sudden light
Have interrupted our routine tonight
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts;
O here and now the endless journey starts.

Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, we come on this Sunday of Epiphany, seeking in common prayer a light upon our way and strength within our hearts for the year ahead. In the darkness of the winter months, be to us a light that shines through the lives of people around us, through the events of the day, through the hope that we embrace and the manner in which we live our lives by faith. Even as we have turned the corner of the winter solstice, with the days getting longer and the light of the sun ever increasing, may our spirits also be illumined and illuminating by the presence of your love.

Beset as we are by misleading counsels and wicked practices, we pray for guidance such as you provided the Magi. The devices and duplicity of the world are familiar and enticing; the lure of the cynical and the inclinations of our own hearts to self-deceit tempt us to lose sight of the road, and many evil solicitations silence our consciences by their subtle persuasion. Fortify our new year's resolutions to live with sincerity, tranquility and self-effacement. May we, like the wise men at the first Epiphany, find the peace and joy that is known in the Christ.

Guide the nations of the world in the coming months and years. You who are above all nations yet at the heart of every religion and in the heart of every caring human being, use all of us for your purposes. Save us from the anarchy of unbridled nationalism; instill within us the wisdom of working across the aisle for the sake of our nation and our world; teach us alike the necessity and joy of learning to be one family. And especially may people of faith, all faiths, be true to our high vocation, that out of the world's travail we may be part of a new hope and justice and goodwill that will be born among your creation.

Come close to hearts that are troubled over their private griefs that they can hardly feel the grief of the world. Be with those discouraged and bereaved, those struggling with financial worries and illnesses of body, spirit and mind. We pray for a new spirit of triumph and hope. For all this we pray in the Spirit of the Christ discovered by the guiding light of the Epiphany star, Amen.

(adapted from a prayer by Harry Emerson Fosdick in *A Book of Public Prayer*)