

January 3, 2021
Rev. Dr. Jane Florence
Matthew 2:1-12
“Message, Metaphor and Meaning”



We turned them into kings. (They weren't.) We put them in our manger scenes. (Wrong Gospel) We've given them names and set them atop camels. (Nope) We've proven the star, or constellations, or planetary alignments, or comet- whichever was an astrological event. (whatever) With all the speculation and preoccupation with the details, do we miss the point?

Aesop tells a story of the tortoise and the hare who agree to a race. Of course a rabbit is faster than a turtle, duh. We bet our money on the bunny to win. I wonder what kind of turtle it was? a snapper? a box turtle? red-eared? or if it was a jack rabbit or a cotton tail? and if the race begins and rabbit is so far ahead that he decides to take a nap, how long did the rabbit sleep? why didn't someone wake him? where was his cheering team? We can get so caught up in the details of the fable- that we forget the moral of the story. The rabbit stopped for a nap, and while he did the turtle plodded past him to win. Oh yeah, slow and steady wins the race.

The details are fun to fill in; it's great to bring our imagination into scripture, but let's not miss the moral of the story. What was Matthew trying to say with this story? Matthew is introducing his gospel, his story of Jesus. Matthew has a consistent message throughout his gospel. Matthew wants his listeners to know: Jesus is the fulfillment of Hebrew Scripture. Jesus is the Messiah that Hebrew's have been expecting for a long long time. Matthew does all he can to connect Jesus to the history of the Jewish people. Matthew's congregation know their own Hebrew history. Matthew tells a story that was not lost on his congregation. His story is told to a Jewish congregation. Matthew speaks to his congregation of the first century. In his birth narrative, Jesus was the new Moses- but more. Moses was venerated as the liberator of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt; Jesus is to be worshipped as the liberator of all humanity. King Herod replaced the Pharaoh in the story, but both evil rulers threatened the lives of the innocent. Just as ancient magi visited and blessed the lineage of King David, Matthew brings magi on the scene to bless and worship Jesus. Matthew's audience heard the nuances of their history in Matthew's birth story.

In Matthew, we focus on these foreign magi; the star-gazers crossed the line in the sand. They crossed the border unhindered by walls. They were not Jews, not Israelites, but they came. They came wondering and wandering. These wise foreigners that others listen to came also to the Christ Child. The first holy family photo was taken with an extended family in the shot from the beginning. The first thing Matthew says they do is 'pay homage.' The first thing they do is kneel down and worship. This cosmic Christ draws a international crowd and starts an ecumenical dialogue in year one. It is the meeting of two world views: Jewish and Gentile, devout and pagan. The magi did not have to convert or renounce or be circumcised or claim a particular theological stance. Matthew allows these non-Jewish people to have a front row view of the One who will show the world a new way. They kneel and worship in this dawning of a new era. Then they present their offerings. Matthew places gold, frankincense and myrrh in the traveler's gift baskets. Symbolic gifts fit for a king, worthy of divinity, and signaling the death as the rest of the story will unfold.

The little baby in Joseph's house grows up and gets killed, not by Herod and the religious establishment at his birth, but by Pilate and the religious establishment three decades later. Jesus came and ushered in a new way. The Way of Jesus turns things upside down and challenges people to live differently- to give generously - to love abundantly - to include the foreigners - to welcome the ostracized - to feed the hungry - to relieve the debt of the poor and heal the wounds of our hearts- to show mercy above law. Jesus announced a new way - a holy and divine way. His way was a threat to the powerful from the beginning. So he was a threat. So they destroyed him. The Christmas story must be linked to the whole story lest we lose the meaning. Without the Easter story, Jesus was just one more Palestinian infant in the world.

Matthew tells of light entering darkness - classic symbols offering truth and hope in our difficult times. Matthew tells of journeys into the unknown - primal metaphors for our life of faith and spirit. Matthew tells of magi taking risks and venturing out of comfort space in order to encounter the holy and be changed and go home a different person living by a different way.

Matthew tells a story of migration, marginalization and displacement and a story of awe and wonder and mystery. It's a story full of meaning and a turning toward a new era and a new horizon of freedom. Bring your imagination into the story and go into the depths of Matthew's message when you do so.

The metaphors and messages of Matthew's story are as true for us today as they were two thousand years ago. We began a new year this week. We set out on our spiritual journey for this year seeking wisdom and enlightenment just like Matthew's story of the magi. We bring wonder and awe and mystery into the new year with our spiritual travels when we resolve to step out and try new patterns of prayer, commit to intentional time of meditation and reflection, engage in a daily devotional, add ten minutes to your mindfulness time each day, show one more act of mercy and grace each day.

We venture and risk following God's Spirit, embodying the Way of Jesus when we dare to join those midnight wanderers and be be changed like them and go forward a different person living by a different way. May it be so.