

“The Variety of God’s Wisdom”

January 3, 2010

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

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This is a story most of us have heard all our lives. In telling it the writer of Matthew’s Gospel opens up a new way of thinking about Jesus and what his birth means not just for Judea and God’s chosen, but for a world looking eagerly for some sign, some assurance that this life is not all there is and that we are not alone in it.

There are all sorts of details to this story of the magi that have become attached to it and color our understanding of it. For instance, even though nothing about royalty is mentioned in the story, tradition has transformed the magi into kings. And even though a number is never assigned them, we’ve always assumed there were three because they only brought three gifts. We’ve even given them names: Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Nothing in the story leads to any of those assumptions, but that’s what often happens to stories over many generations. In their telling and re-telling certain details are added as a way of helping to explain everything taking place.

Because it really is a puzzling story. It’s puzzling because it’s not at all clear why these magi are so intent on seeing this child. What is it that draws them, what voice is calling them? Why is it important that they arrive? It seems to me, those are more important questions than wondering who they are, except to realize that they are outsiders, people considered beyond the pale of God’s concern. How is it that outsiders are being called to seek Jesus?

That’s the most astonishing thing about the gospel. We can hear that sense of wonder being conveyed through the words attributed to Paul, the first evangelist to outsiders, when we read in Ephesians: “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” That outsiders are made part of the body is revealed as the “mystery of Christ.”

Matthew illustrates this mystery through this story of magi from the east traveling long, desert miles to find Jesus. Among other things this story tells us that this broad inclusion isn’t an afterthought or some desperate bid for popularity when the initial audience failed to respond, but that it was part of God’s intention from the very beginning. Emmanuel means “God with us,” all of us, and not just a few.

It’s that inclusive intention that Ephesians through Paul’s voice calls the “rich variety” of God’s wisdom. For too long have people been separated by race or class or social circumstances. The world has limped along with rulers and authorities doing everything they can to maintain divisions and control populations by setting them against

one another. But in Christ a unity is revealed that transcends every division and breaks down every wall of separation.

This has been the movement, the trajectory, of the gospel all along. And we see it here when we celebrate this meal. All are welcome at this table. There is no litmus test to determine who is allowed. We have no way of controlling who Christ calls to meet him at this table. The variety of God's wisdom is revealed at this meal because there can be no distinction of persons here. None is elevated and none is denied.

And that's not always an easy thing to accept. There may be some whom I would rather not see welcomed here. There may be some you would rather not see welcomed. Thank God entry to this table isn't dependent on my judgment...or on yours. Who among us could really measure up if it were left to us? But God has eliminated the need for us to pass judgment on our sisters and brothers by making us all one in Christ.

This morning as we celebrate this epiphany, this revealing of the light of God's love, I invite you to consider whom you might wish to keep away from this table. Who do you believe is beyond the pale of God's concern? I've quoted this from Dorothy Day before, but I think it's worth saying again, "We can only love God as much as we love the person we love the least." I invite you today, as you make your way to this table, to make room in your heart for those you want to keep away. Let your love for them grow and make a place for them at the table.

In doing that you will begin to discover how astonishing this mystery really is. You'll begin to discover the deep truth of this story of the magi seeking Jesus. And your heart and spirit will be set rejoicing in the rich variety of God's wisdom that calls each of us and welcomes us every one.

Amen