

Epiphany Day

January 6, 2018

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 King 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 with 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.

I once visited a planetarium which was putting on a program about the Star of Bethlehem. The program was very well done, and presented some possibilities that some scientists have speculated might have been the astronomical event which the Wise Men identified as the "Star of Bethlehem." But what struck me the most was when the presenter darkened the Planetarium and projected upon the domed ceiling the night sky as it looked above Bethlehem on Christmas Day of that year, 1982; and **then** the stars started moving as the computerized projector went back in time until we could see the night sky exactly the way it would have appeared over Bethlehem the year Jesus was born. To this day, a chill goes down my spine when I

remember looking up at that sky on the hemispheric ceiling of that planetarium. For, suddenly I was there! There was no longer any distance between me and those Wise Men. I was seeing the same sky that they saw.

That's something we often miss when we read the Biblical stories of Jesus. We read them as ancient history – events from the **First** Century which have little to do with you and me in the **21st** Century. But what is crucial for us to understand is that this is *not* the way the large majority of humanity has viewed history down through the millennia. People of ages past felt themselves *linked* with their ancestors, **and** their descendants. They felt themselves as part of a continuum in time, a great communion of saints. I'm not so sure we do anymore – and I recently read a marvelous article that explains, at least in part, why that is so in our digital world.

It was written by James Carroll, a columnist for the Boston Globe, and in his article Mr. Carroll ponders the difference between analog and digital clocks. James Carroll writes:

“OUR TWO kinds of clocks give us two kinds of time. The old fashioned clock defines time as a continuity. Thus, its numerically defined face and pointed hands sweep through an endless succession

of circles, marking seconds, minutes, and hours. This is the so-called analog clock, and the analogy it offers is of measurable flow. The word for our smallest unit of time, second, *suggests* that dynamic, since it derives from the Latin for “following”. Each second follows another — sequentially. ...[T]he face of the clock knows no separation in the values of time, but instead displays a moving picture of the past forever drifting into the present and on into the future.

“The cycle of the hands of the clock mimics the *perceived* movement of the sun around the earth. Sunrise, sunset — **there’s** the analog clock’s *prime* analogy. Its hands, that is, replicate the moving shadow of the sundial, which replicates the planetary dance. Motion is the point, and context is inevitably manifest, with hours past always linked with hours yet to come. The whole of time is shown.

“The **digital** clock is different. In the common form showing only hours and minutes, the numbers remain static until a shift occurs. A well-placed colon defines the distinction between hours and minutes, pictured as frozen. Periodically, the numbers jump. Time is not continuous, but episodic. The digital clock renders a perennial present, effectively denying the existence of the past and the future. As its numbers exist not in relationship but in themselves alone, so the present exists not in context of what precedes or follows, but in itself.

Now and now alone. The digital instrument has no face, no hands, no hint of the sun and earth in synchrony...

“... The shift from the accumulation of experiences that are understood by virtue of their *connection* to one another... to life perceived as a series of *un*related happenings... is an impoverishment... The narrative imagination, which is concerned with linkage and causality, thus gives way to episodic thinking. The queen died. Then the king died. A digital clock can mark those episodes because they are unconnected. But... if the queen died, and then the king died *of grief* — we are in the analogic realm of time where the **connection** between events is what matters. We are in the realm of feeling... Digits know nothing of such things. Humans are creatures for whom **now** takes its meaning from **then**. The old clock shows that. It has a face and hands because it resembles us.”

(“**Time’s face, time’s digits**”, by [James Carroll](#), February 14, 2011 © Copyright 2011 Globe Newspaper Company.)

We will never understand the Biblical story of the magi if we don’t comprehend that it is not simply about a moment in time, but rather is also about the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, and a foreshadowing of the future. It is about you and me, all our ancestors, and all our descendants. And it is about all races, nationalities, and religions.

In our Old Testament lesson today, there is a prophecy from Isaiah which Matthew undoubtedly remembered as he wrote his account of the magi: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn,” Isaiah wrote. “...They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.” Matthew would also have been familiar with today’s psalm, which says, “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts. All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service.” When the Wise Men ask where the new king is to be born, King Herod’s advisors quote the prophet Micah: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.” (Micah 5:2) Matthew knew that verse from the Book of Numbers which reads, “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...” He would have seen the parallel in the distant Gentile magi bringing gold and spices to this new king and the distant Gentile Queen of Sheba bringing gold and spices to one of Jesus’ ancestors, King Solomon, the son of David, just as Jesus is called “Son of David”. Those Gentile magi are inextricably linked to the Jewish prophets who lived centuries before and a thousand miles away.

The gifts which the magi bring at Jesus’ birth foreshadow the future understanding that Christians would have of Jesus: Gold is precious, worthy of a king; frankincense is incense worthy of divinity; and myrrh is a spice used in burials, which shows that the manger is linked

with the cross; they are not isolated events, distinct times on the digital clock, but rather are of a piece. So the three gifts were appropriate for one who was a king, a God, and a suffering redeemer.

What is especially interesting in the story of the magi, King Herod, and the chief priests and scribes who advise Herod, is the need for both Jew and Gentile, wise men of both traditions. The magi could not find the king they were looking for until they heard from those who knew the Scriptures; but those who knew the Scriptures did not recognize the heavenly sign that the Messiah had been born. *They* needed the Gentile magi to point it out. Jew **and** Gentile, those of radically different backgrounds, need each other. God reveals his birth in human form to uneducated Jewish shepherds and foreign wise men, who in turn reveal the good news to a Jewish king and Jewish religious leaders, who hold a necessary piece of the puzzle. All are linked together to the past and the future. Like many other Gospel stories, this one is actually the gospel in miniature that describes the coming of the Messiah and various responses to that coming: both reception and rejection. The magi come to worship him, and Herod seeks to kill him. At the beginning of the Gospel the Gentile magi come to worship Jesus. At the end of the Gospel, the disciples are told, "Go and make disciples of all nations" ([28:19](#)).

My friends, I believe that many of our problems today stem from an atomistic view of life – a digital view, if you will, rather than a relational, analog, wholistic view. If someone knows himself to be intrinsically linked with all other living beings – Jew and Gentile, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and atheists, Americans, Africans, Afghanis, virtuous churchgoers and convicted criminals, even animals and plants, how can that someone murder others who are so linked with him? If someone *knows* himself to be intrinsically linked with all those who have gone before us and all who will come after us, if we see ourselves as part of the very fabric of God’s redemptive plan for the cosmos, how can we feel alone or isolated, or without meaning?

I think we **do** feel part of that great analog-clock universe at Christmas time. Engulfed by the Christmas spirit, we reach out to the poor, we speak of joy to the world and peace on earth. “Joyful, *all you nations*, rise! Join the triumph of the skies!” It is a *cosmic* oneness we feel. But then Christmas ends, and we return to our disconnected, digital-clock worlds. How do we maintain that Christmas sense of oneness? We need to remember that Epiphany follows Christmas, and the Epiphany story of the wise men and the star is a story of unity between ancient prophecy and future fulfillment; of people from other religious traditions (the wise men were likely Zoroastrian priests) revealing truths about God which our Scriptures reveal but we often reject. When the angel appeared to the shepherds, he told them “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for **all people**.” Not just for Jews, not just for Gentiles, not just for

Christians, not just for Americans; not just the shepherds 2000 years ago but all races and religions and languages, past, present and future. The wise men are “the others”, the “not us” who come into our midst and tell us of the God from our own scriptures who lives among us, unnoticed, unseen, unheeded. What we need to remember is that, if we are open to their guidance, we can see the same sky that they saw.

AMEN

(I am indebted to R. Alan Culpepper for some of the above)