

THE LIGHT OF LIFE
Matthew 2:1-12; John 8:12
January 7, 2018
Rev. Jerry Duggins

When the wise men see that the star has come to rest, they rejoice, for they have found the object for which they've journeyed so far, the one whom they believed would become king of the Jews. Not everyone is happy about this. Herod, the current king, is frightened at the news of this birth, as is the whole city of Jerusalem. Now why is that? Why is Herod worried about a child born to a poor or at best middle-class couple in Bethlehem?

We, by which I mean preachers, hardly ever explore this question fully. We treat this fact as a foot-note in the story, saying (if we say anything) that Herod is worried about competition for the throne. And then we move on to talk about the star, or the gifts, or the worship that the kings render to Jesus. We place the wise men alongside the poor shepherds, and the singing angels and we sum it up with the good news that Jesus has come for everyone: for Jew and Gentile, for rich and poor. We blend Matthew's version with Luke's account and call it all good.

But Matthew has no shepherds and the angels don't sing. Instead they operate covertly, speaking only to Joseph and the wise men in dreams. The faithful and joyous Mary of Luke's gospel is silent in Matthew. We know only that she is found to be with child, but nothing about her feelings. Joseph, a good guy, wants to dismiss Mary quietly, but after the angelic arm-twisting, he consents to play his part. The only joy in the story belongs to the wise men.

I'll come back to this joy, but first, let's try to understand Matthew's story as he intended and not through the eyes of Luke. The first thing we need to notice is that Herod's fear is not a foot-note. It stands at the center of the story and it is not just Herod who is afraid, but the whole city of Jerusalem. And so we come back to the question that deserves a more complete answer than we, that is, preachers, typically give it.

We can forgive the wise men for looking in Jerusalem instead of proceeding directly to Bethlehem. It is, in the first place, not far from the city of David and it is where the current "King of the Jews" resides. It is where one would expect to find the apparent heir to the throne. We are told that they are warned in a dream not to return, but they would have been able to read the signs of Herod's duplicity.

Herod, you see, was not the legitimate ruler of Israel. There was, in fact, no Israel at the time. Palestine and its people belonged to the Roman Empire, and Herod was Caesar's appointed representative. He did not in fact come from the line of David. He did not serve the interests of the people. He and his staff were skimming off the top the payments that went to Rome. Rome looked the other way as long as the city remained "peaceful."

Herod and the city's powerful elite were not afraid of a mere child, but of what the child represented. They were afraid of a child born in the line of David who might someday make a legitimate claim to rule Israel, a child around whom the oppressed people might gather. Jesus was dangerous because he was legitimate. This is why Matthew begins with the genealogy and why it's so important that Joseph take Mary as his wife.

Now one might argue that Jesus does not in fact become a threat to Herod's reign, but Herod feels threatened along with those who control the city. And when we come to the end of the gospel, Rome also feels threatened by Jesus and so becomes an active participant in his death. The politics of the time are so volatile that Joseph and Mary must take their child to Egypt, becoming political refugees.

There are many who believe that Jesus was not political and there is a sense in which this is true. He was not interested in overthrowing the rule of Rome. He practiced and taught the kind of faith that could endure persecution from political figures. But politics simmered all around his life, and his teaching shed light on the sort of politics that were consistent or not consistent with faith. Jesus' teachings about wealth carries a not-so-subtle criticism of those who use politics to line their own pockets at the expense of others. Jesus had a lot to say about what was good and what was evil. To imagine that these teachings do not cut across the field of politics is to be very naïve indeed.

I love this story about the wise men. In years past, I've enjoyed talking about the star, about the gifts, and about the homage paid to Jesus. These aspects of the story rightfully inspire and instruct us, but so too do the political realities that lie at the core of the story. Politics mattered to Matthew as it matters in just about every book of the Bible. The politics of Jesus' day impacted him for good and for ill, mostly the latter, of course. As I said, he did not understand his mission as the overthrow of the tyrannies of Rome, but had Rome listened to him, it might have discovered a way to rule that benefitted all and not just those in authority.

In short, do not separate your faith from your political views. Listening and following Jesus informs all of life. Having said that, let's return to the story and see what difference this context makes in our reading. If Herod and the Jerusalem leaders are at the center of the story, then the basic contrast we should notice is between the joy of the wise men and the fear of the city. This contrast is founded on the differing ways in which the groups see Jesus: the one as a threat, the other as a cause for celebration and joy. I think we want to be in the joy category! That can be quite a challenge in today's world, especially give the divisive politics that inundate us every day. I love how Miroslav Wolf presents the problem and proposes a solution in the most recent *Christian Century*:

"We rejoice when something good happens to us or to those who matter to us, but we can be mistaken in our response. We can interpret as good something that is in fact evil, and we can interpret as bad something that is in fact good. We may falsely rejoice over evil things and mistakenly rage over good things. For true joy, two things are

needed: the object must be good and the good object must *appear to us as good*. Joy is a fruit of truthful seeing of genuine goods” (p.10).

In simple terms then, Herod and Jerusalem see Jesus as something bad for them when he is in fact good, and so fear follows. But the wise men see Jesus as good and he is in fact good, and so genuine joy follows. “Joy is a fruit of truthful seeing of genuine goods.”

I suspect that many of us despair of “truthful seeing” not just in politics, but also in relationships, in the social structures that sustain racism. We don’t know what will make us healthier, happier, or more at peace. We imagine all kinds of things that might be good but maybe aren’t. Is marriage such a good that we should stay in an abusive relationship? Is law and order such a good that we should excuse the violence of those in authority? Is national security such a good that we should lock down the borders? Is independence such a good that we should exercise tough love with those who struggle to cope with their lives?

These are difficult personal, social and political questions we face. Matthew sees the path to joy as a path of “truthful seeing.” Isaiah speaks of the coming messiah as a “light to the nations.” For Matthew this image takes the form of a star that guides the wise men to the Christ Child. “Truthful seeing” requires light and for us, Jesus is that light. “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says in John’s gospel, “Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

As Volf points out, sometimes we don’t see clearly. We mistake the bad for the good and the good for the bad. We’re often not sure what Jesus would do or say. And we certainly don’t all agree about that. But as followers of Jesus, do we really imagine that Jesus has nothing to say about the plight of refugees, that it doesn’t matter to him who benefits from the recent tax plan and who doesn’t? Do we really think that Jesus would want the vulnerable and the oppressed to work things out for themselves?

A lot of things are of course not clear to us, but as his followers, we are on a journey, led by a star, to the place where he is. This journey passes through and covers all of life. The biggest injustice that the church has done to Jesus has been to take him off the mountain where he speaks to any who would hear him and contain him within the walls of the sanctuary. He is for you and for all who would hear him in every circumstance and in all aspects of life. And the greatest joy comes not in the structured sanctuary of religion, but when we have discovered him in the details of our living. Wherever we may be, we need not “walk in darkness” for we follow one who is the “light of life.” Amen.

Miroslav Volf, “Seeing Goodness”, in *The Christian Century*, January 3, 2018 pp. 10-11.