

## **“What Manger will Magi be drawn to in 2010?”**

Matthew 2:1-12

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This morning we hear the Epiphany story once again. It is the account of the Magi following the star that leads them to the manger where Jesus was born. It is a wonderful story that is filled with images that spark the imagination. Mysterious strangers, celestial realignments, an innocent family and a tyrannical king, how could we not lean forward to hear what might happen.

This story is only recorded in Matthew's gospel – Mark, Luke and John didn't feel so compelled to show how people in other parts of the world were affected by Christ's birth. But Matthew felt it was really important to say that Christ's birth didn't have just a local impact, he wanted to make sure that Herod and other magistrates knew that the world was watching. Matthew was careful to prove that Jesus was of the royal lineage of King David and because of this and the coalescing of other signs, Jesus was destined to be a force in the world. The question for Herod and others was, what kind of force would this Jesus be?

I have always thought the Magi from the east to be a combination of royal wealth, intellectual curiosity and benevolent philanthropy. The Magi were people with a bias who perceived that this child of lowly means would grow and become an important voice in the world. Before the child accomplished anything, before the child revealed his heart and spirit, before they knew anything about the predictions of the Hebrew prophets, the Magi traveled long distances to pay homage to the Christ child. They gave their gifts freely and they did not betray Mary, Joseph and Jesus to Herod. Their trust and devotion had little to do with Jesus proving himself, and everything to do with their hope, intuition and ability to read the signs of the time.

While Herod feared that Jesus would grow up to be a rival king, the Magi hoped that Jesus would speak of more essential and transformative matters. While the Magi were aware of political and military power, what they paid homage to in Bethlehem was life, and not just life, but life that had inherent value in all its forms. The magi offered their gifts to Jesus and his family because they were choosing to support what is life giving in the world and eternity.

The Magi's actions remind me of the Alaskan story about the young man who goes to a tribal elder with a great concern about the presence of good and evil in the world. The young man tells the elder that he has seen hatred and evil in his days, and he has also seen compassion and good, and he wonders what causes the human heart to choose one over the other. The Elder tells the young man that there are indeed two dogs fighting within each person. The young man wants to know which dog wins in the end, the good dog or the

evil one. The elder, who knows that it is a human desire to feel like we have no control over whether good or evil wins the fight, turns to the young man and says: “The one you feed the most wins the fight.”

The Magi who went to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus were men of wealth, knowledge and they were also visitors from another land. But their hearts were human, their hopes were common and their spirits were free. The Magi went to Bethlehem to feed what they believed to be good and filled with eternity’s purpose. Not with instructions, not with conditions attached, the Magi gave freely in the hope that goodness would grow in the lives of people who were strangers to them.

We are now in a new year, a new decade, a new opportunity to live out our convictions and hopes. In the last week or two I have watched newsreel after newsreel hashing over how people who have resolved to lose weight once again will decide how and what to eat. The New Year also provides us time to reflect on what we feed our souls and what we will participate in feeding others and the world. The Magi chose and risked feeding what is life giving and we have the opportunity to choose likewise.

It is clear that at the time of his birth, throughout his ministry and in his death and resurrection, Jesus invited people to choose life and love. In this new year the invitation is offered to us again. The trick of course is for us to discern among competing voices and concerns about what is life giving in this world – is abortion always wrong, or is there also a necessity for women to have safe abortion options available? Is violence always wrong, or are there times when violence is necessary to defeat those who abuse the innocent? Are our rights to private ownership inviolate, or are there times when the public good is more important than our personal rights? Does forgiveness heal our pain more than revenge?

The longer I live, the more I struggle with the complexities of when I am feeding the good dog and when I am feeding the evil one. I take solace in the wisdom of people who say “we are called to be faithful even if we are not always successful,” and those who say, “it is better to try even if we make mistakes, than it is simply to be a spectator of life.”

Complexity is not an excuse for passively allowing others to decide what will happen and what won’t - one way or another we participate in feeding good or evil, we are called to live trusting in God’s ways, knowing that we will need forgiveness and transformation along the journey.

As I was reading the story of the Magi’s journey to Bethlehem so long ago I began to wonder what manger might they be drawn to this year? Where would they go in the world to see God’s presence? To whom or what would they give their gifts? These questions were not just about where the Magi would go, they are also about where you and I might go to encounter what is holy, to find hope and to offer our gifts.

At first I thought that it would be terrible difficult to say where the Magi and we might go. At first my pessimism about so many destructive dimensions of our world caused me to think that there are few mangers out there where God might be found, but that thought was short lived and I began to think of hundreds of mangers. As I thought of where the Magi went, where Jesus was, two insights helped free me from my pessimism.

The first insight was that the manger didn't make future promises, it simply invited the Magi into the beauty and wonder of the moment. The time beyond their visit was uncertain there were many perils to overcome on the road ahead for the Magi and the family, but the future did not strip the manger of its glory.

Sometimes I back away from places where God might be found if the future seems uncertain. If it seems that my efforts won't solve a problem once and for all I am not very inclined to undertake it. I am reading a book called "Half the Sky" which is about effort to end the horrors of sexual enslavement of young women around the world. At one point the authors tell a story of how some people bought the freedom of two young girls in Cambodia. They paid the owners of a brothel for the girls and took them to safety, but after less than a year one of the girls was back in the brothel. The people who bought the girl's freedom were confused and frustrated, and wonder why they had even tried to help. But they tried again and again, learning from each attempt to permanently free the girl, not knowing whether they would succeed. They were committed to their calling and one day, without their intervention the girl found her own way to freedom. When she later told them about her escape and new life she said she could do it because she knew that people believed in her.

There are plenty of mangers for us to visit not because we are certain about the future, but because we believe in the beauty and value of the life that we encounter in each moment.

The second insight that came to me when I thought of the Magi and the manger was that vulnerability and strength were not in opposition, they were one and the same.

The Magi did not give their gifts out of pity and they did not give their gifts because they thought the family was incapable. The Magi gave their gifts to support what already existed. The wise Magi recognized all that was present instead of what was absent, even in the place that most of the world would call desolate.

I heard a man being interviewed on public radio the other day – they were talking about the impact of the recession. The man on the radio said that he wasn't wealthy before the recession and he had even less financial security now. But he said one thing sticks out most for him in 2009, he went to fewer movies, took fewer trips and ate simple meals and he spent more time enjoying the company of friends, family and neighbors that he ever has.

He said it was a remarkable year for him because he felt connected to people in a richer way. His vulnerability became his gift.

The manger that the Magi visited offered no certainties about the future, only the beauty and wonder of those who found themselves gathered there. The manger the Magi visited was not empty, it was filled with gifts surprising and beyond our imagining – not gifts of wealth and might, but gifts of devotion, love and hope.

If the Magi were to seek God's birth today it would no doubt be in places where the future is uncertain but the beauty of the moment is filled with life, strength, vulnerability, hope and love. If we are seeking God perhaps those are the places and people we will seek in 2010.