

9 Miles South
Matthew 2:1-12
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
January 6, 2008
Dr. Brent Beasley

Reading about the “Three Wise Men” this week, I came across a great paragraph written by Debra Blue. [*Sensual Orthodoxy*, p. 17, Cathedral Hill Press, 2004]:

I've been thinking maybe someone should start a small group of guerilla activists whose task it would be to plant shocking figures in manger scenes. They could work both inside private homes as well as in the most visible places.

Suburban housewives will shriek to find Batman figures on the roof of the manger on their mantle. Churches will be horrified to find Barbies and plastic dinosaurs on their altars.

But people will pay attention. They will look twice. They may even stop their car. They may even get out when they see a garden troll or a pink flamingo or a big plastic Homer Simpson leaning over the baby Jesus on the Cathedral lawn.

I actually wonder if I'm not the first to come up with that idea. It might have been some guerilla group that first placed the wise men in the manger scenes.

I don't know who first put the wise men in manger scenes, but you know they don't belong there, right? Right?

We really know very little about the three wise men despite the story we tell in Christmas pageants and songs and nativity

sets—about how three kings arrived in Bethlehem, fast on the heels of the shepherds, to pay homage to the baby in a manger.

The problem is that the gospels do not confirm this version of the story. In fact what we do know is a bit different:

First, the three kings were not kings at all, but rather they were magi, wise men, professional scholars schooled in the science of astrology.

Second, we do not know if there were three of them or thirty, we only know that there were three gifts given.

Third, there is no mention of the manger in the story of the wise men, in fact just the opposite. The story states that the wise men entered into a house.

And fourth, the last statement is really no surprise if you read the story found in the gospel of Matthew carefully. Because you discover in it that the wise men arrived in Bethlehem close to two years after the birth of Jesus—time enough for Mary and Joseph to have found a house and settled in.

[Richard J. Fairchild, *Sermons & Sermon-Lectinary Resources*]

Christians across denominations and around the world know this Sunday and the season that follows it as Epiphany. The name “Epiphany” comes from a Greek word meaning “manifestation” or “appearance.” The Epiphany of Christ is a celebration of his manifestation to the all the peoples of the world.

The Epiphany season follows Christmas and ends on the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday (the day that begins the season of Lent). Epiphany itself occurs on January 6.

This revelation to the Gentiles is represented by the magi who make their long journey after Jesus' birth to see this "King of the Jews."

So, the magi—these gentile stargazers— saw a star in the sky that they interpreted to be a sign that the king of the Jews had been born. And of course Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. So the magi got on their camels and headed straight to...Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the capital city of Judea and Herod was King. It was natural for them to expect that the next King would be born in Jerusalem, probably into Herod's family, and so they went there instead of Bethlehem.

And when Herod heard what they were saying, he was troubled and the text says, *and all Jerusalem with him*. The people of Jerusalem knew to be troubled with Herod was upset. If Herod's not happy, nobody's happy.

Herod did some good things as king. He was the only Roman ruler of Palestine who ever succeeded in keeping the peace. He was a great builder; he had rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. He had even melted down his own gold plate to buy corn when his people were starving during a famine.

He did some good things, but he had one terrible flaw: he was a little crazy; actually, he was insanely suspicious. Today, I

guess we would call him paranoid. The older he got, the more paranoid he got.

Herod did not need anyone to spell things out for him. On the flimsiest of evidence, on just getting the notion into his head that someone was out to get him, he got them first. He murdered his wife and her mother. He also assassinated three of his own sons, all because he suspected that they wanted to take the throne.

[Doug Goins, "Journey of Wisdom," www.pbc.org]

So, you can see why the magi's search was troubling to him. Any baby who would grow up to be king was a rival to Herod and Herod wouldn't stand for it.

So the magi see the star heralding the birth of a new king, and they go to Jerusalem, the capital city. You know what scripture they were thinking of: Isaiah 60. Isaiah 60 is a poem recited to Jews in Jerusalem about 580 B.C.E. These Jews had been in exile in Iraq for a couple of generations and had come back to the bombed-out city of Jerusalem. They were in despair.

In the middle of the mess, an amazing poet invites his depressed, discouraged contemporaries to look up, to hope and to expect everything to change. *Rise, shine, for your light has come.*

The poet anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* . . . Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration.

The wise men know about Isaiah 60. They know they are to go to Jerusalem. They know that line in Isaiah 60 that says: *They shall bring gold and frankincense*. They know that they will find the new king of all peace and prosperity.

I have to say I never thought about before this week what a strange thing it is that it is Herod's scholars who give the right answer about the proper scripture for Jesus' birth. In his panic, Herod arranges a consultation with the leading Old Testament scholars in Jerusalem, and says to them, *Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?*

The scholars tell him: *You have the wrong text. And the wise men outside your window are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. Isaiah 60 is misleading you, because that suggests that it's all about the capital city, that the new king will rule from a palace and a capitol building.*

So Herod says, *Well, do you have a better text?*

The scholars are afraid of the angry king, but tell him, with much trepidation, that the right text is Micah 5:2-4:
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. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall

be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

This is the voice of the peasants, the common folk, and their hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and capitol buildings, and urban achievements.

It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the common people.

The new king, in other words, is not to be found in Jerusalem's palace. This new king is 9 miles south in the little town of Bethlehem. The magi were 9 miles off. They went to the seat of power, the center of the establishment. But Jesus was nine miles south. Jesus was to be found nine miles south of the imperial city in the small working class village of Bethlehem.

[Walter Brueggeman, "Off By Nine Miles," The Christian Century, December 19-26, 2001, p. 51]

The magi learn that the gospel is not only for the powerful not only for the insiders.

The gospel is also for those nine miles south. Those that we never even thought about including. Jesus is not only found at the prestigious corner of Walnut Grove and Perkins in the heart of East Memphis. Jesus is also found nine miles south of here. And nine miles north.

The reign of God is for all people, and it would be a mistake to assume, like those magi, that Jesus is only found in Jerusalem.

I'd like to think that we have a certain identity as a church on the side of the inclusive Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have a history to be proud of of welcoming inside the circle of the church and inside the circle of ministry those who more often than not were in the past and in many cases still are in the present left standing on the outside of the circle.

I want to tell a thirty-year-old story about a sermon that got out of control. A pastor was delivering the sermon to his parish in downtown Macon, Georgia, on a Sunday in the late sixties.

As you know, the whole country was in an uproar with Vietnam and civil rights marches and women were waking up to new possibilities and young people and college students were finding ways to be outrageous. All of this was swirling around this congregation in Macon, which included city fathers, local government officials, city council people, all of whom made it clear to their young pastor that on Sunday they wanted to rest from the unrest. They wanted to come to church and slip peacefully into the rhythms of the familiar order of worship and then hear an uplifting, well-thought-out sermon about love or something, and then they wanted to be done with it and go home.

Well newcomers started showing up in church driving in from nine miles south. Some came in jeans and long hair, even "rock music" types. The newcomers got involved in outreach ministries serving the poor, which was sort of okay with the church leaders.

But the newcomers also wanted the poor and anybody else to come to church--which was not okay. They even put an advertisement in the paper with the Sunday service schedule and a picture of a black sheep and the words "Come As You Are." Inviting even more strange people to flock to the church through the newspapers, with the connotation that some of the sheep might be black sheep, was the last straw for the traditionalists. One woman mailed a letter to the entire parish in which she stated that the reach of the outreach people had exceeded the grasp of any sensible person by a long shot.

Thus, tension pervaded the atmosphere on that Sunday when the pastor was about to preach his sermon that got out of control. The scripture reading included an encounter between Jesus and some Pharisees when Jesus reminds them of Isaiah. *...as it is written, 'this people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me'... You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition* (Mark7: 6b-8). Well, what more solid scriptural platform could you want? The priest quoted the text and launched, subtly of course, into repenting the traditionalists' sins. He spoke with assurance, deftly weaving the stories of Isaiah's community and Jesus' crowd and the world of Macon, Georgia.

He described the parallels in a gently ironic tone, and he looked out over the congregation who seemed transfixed. If the truth were to be told he was pleased with himself. Then as he paused for breath, the unthinkable happened. A lady stood up. Not one of the new casual types who might be standing to applaud and say *right on*. Oh no, the lady who stood was an old-timer; in fact she was the one who had written the letter denouncing the newspaper advertisement. It flashed through his mind that she definitely not standing to applaud or say *right on*. Instead

she talked back. Instead she said, *Do you mean to say we are wrong? Do you mean to say that for all these years we have been wrong?* Then the young pastor opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out. And he stood in the pulpit. For a moment, all was silence. And then another voice in the congregation spoke up and then another and then another.

And people talked of trying to become part of church and being frozen out. And others mourned the loss of respect for traditions held dear. And some yelled in anger and some said they were afraid of what the church and the whole world were coming to. And many people cried. The congregation argued among themselves for about twenty minutes. And the young pastor stood frozen in the pulpit. And listened. Then for a moment all was silence again. And he said, *I don't know what to do. What do we do now?*

And someone said, *Well, we might as well do Communion.* And they did. And the young pastor said that by the time he got home, he was a changed preacher. Because he never got into the pulpit again without remembering the possibility of somebody talking back. And he never spoke from the pulpit again without remembering that perhaps the gospel would not be heard in his well-chosen words. Perhaps the gospel would be heard instead, by him and everybody else, through the interruption, through the unexpected. and of course you can imagine the rest of the story. Like Paul and the Gentiles, the enraged traditional woman became the instrument of reconciliation between the old-timers and the new people. She was the first woman ever on the vestry (like our deacons), and, largely through her sponsorship, the first female priest in Georgia came to that congregation.

[Fr. Gerald Fuller, St. William Parish, Gainesville, MO]

And through the grace of God in her and some others, the doors of the church opened wider to invite strangers in from as far as nine miles south—and to send people out nine miles south to love and serve.

The magi discovered that Jesus is not always found just where we assume he should be.

He's not always found in the places we frequent. He's not always found in the center of our comfort zone.

A lot of times, you know, you'll have to look nine miles south.

The wise men made that trip. Imagine, a nine mile journey.