

WGUMC January 4, 2015 "The Gospel Goes Global"
Matthew 2:1-12 and Ephesians 3:1-12

I just realized that one of the nice things about the Christmas season is that Congress is not in session. For a few blessed weeks we haven't been subjected to the name-calling, blame-shifting, and fear-mongering that passes for politics these days. For that reason, some of us wish Christmas would never end, and we get disturbed when the Bible itself inserts politics into Christmas.

While most of us are finishing up the fudge and packing up our decorations for another year, here comes the last chapter of the Christmas story, the story of the wise men from the East asking King Herod where the Messiah is to be born. If you know anything about Jewish history, you know that this is the quintessential political question, and Herod understood it to be an existential political threat. After consulting the experts he told the magi where the child was to be born, but he had no intention of worshiping him. He had much more

sinister plans. The "slaughter of the innocents" that comes in the next few verses in Matthew is the part of the story we didn't read this morning. [Matthew 2:16-18]

I have no stomach for politics so early in the new year, so let's concentrate instead on the part about the wise men. What do we really know about them? Almost nothing. They most certainly were not kings. Now if you lived in Alabama, you might think they were firemen, because after all the song says they came from *afar*. But the Bible says they came from the East, from modern-day Syria, Iraq or possibly Iran. The Greek text says that they were *magoi*, which comes from a Persian word (*magus*). So I suppose they could have been Zoroastrian priests. Or astrologers or dream interpreters or magicians. Who knows?

What's most interesting to me is that they were not Jewish. Yet they came to ask Herod, the Jewish king, about an obscure Jewish prophecy (in the Book of Micah) regarding a

Jewish Messiah who was coming to save the Jewish people. So my question is: why would wise men from the East even care? Why would these Gentiles waste their time looking for a Jewish savior? They brought gifts, but what was the takeaway for them? We can only imagine.

In fact, every time the story of Jesus comes into a different culture, we can only imagine how it is heard and received. We can only imagine how the truth gets translated and transformed in the lives of the hearers. And we know that the truth gets transformed because we can see it in the ministry of Paul.

Paul was a very good Jew, but the author of Ephesians calls him "a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles." [Ephesians 3:1] So despite his Jewish credentials, it was Paul's job to bring the good news of "the boundless riches of Christ" to those who were not Jews, who had previously been shut out of the promise. [3:8] According to him, there

was a plan: It was a "mystery hidden for ages in God." And the plan was this: that the Messiah of Israel would come to be the Savior of the WHOLE world. [3:9]

So it was God's intention all along to share the good news beyond the boundaries of Israel. That's why the magi make their appearance in this story. But once they do, things start to get a little messy. Once the news gets shared with people who don't share the same history, culture, politics and religious customs as the Jews, then the story is no longer quite the same. As the Gospel makes a new home in new lands it begins to generate new meanings and new practices. I guess that's why the Good News is always new.

But we don't need to worry that the faith has changed so much that we probably wouldn't recognize Christianity as it was practiced in ancient Palestine. It was God's plan that as the Gospel went global it would go way beyond the Bible.

In fact, many of the things that we most associate with Christianity aren't really found in the Bible. For instance, you won't find the word "Trinity" there. Had the Gospel not spread into the Greek world, we wouldn't have a doctrine of the Trinity. At least we wouldn't know how to talk about it, because all of our language about Trinity comes from the vocabulary of Greek philosophy.

What about the churches? In the Bible, Christians were worshiping in homes and synagogues. So Christians may never have built great basilicas and cathedrals had the gospel not been preached in Rome. As you know, the Romans were very good at constructing great public buildings for their gods and for their emperors, like Caesar Augustus, who claimed to be the son of god. But after Constantine converted to Christianity, they started building magnificent churches for Jesus Christ, the true Son of God.

Getting closer to home. What about Christmas? The first Christians didn't celebrate it. And we might not either if Christianity hadn't come into contact with similar Roman rituals. Nor would we be putting decorated fir trees in our family room if the Gospel hadn't made it to pagan Germany.

Maybe I could give up my Christmas tree, but not Christmas music. Can you imagine Christian worship without the wonderful music? Jesus and his disciples sang psalms, but right up to the early modern period, there wasn't much else. There were Gregorian chants, which no one could sing, and metrical psalms, which were the words of Scripture set to monotonous melodies. Just think: there would be no gospel in the Gospel if the Good News had never gotten to England, where Isaac Watts broke the rules and Charles Wesley helped Christians to sing their faith and experience it like never before. Worship has never been the same since.

Can you see what I'm getting at here? Christianity didn't come to us fully formed with the birth of Christ. It was God's plan to reveal to us the "boundless riches of Christ" through the spread of Christianity into Gentile cultures. This was Paul's task: to reveal Christ to the Gentiles and to build up the Body of Christ in lands outside of Palestine so that "through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known..." [3:10]

The possibilities excite me. It's liberating to know that no one culture that can capture all the wisdom of God in its rich variety. That's why we need many different people telling us strange and wonderful stories and practicing their faith in foreign and mysterious ways. In the next several weeks, we are going to be hearing about Christians living the Gospel in different places: in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. For we can't know the whole truth of the Gospel unless we know what the Good News is doing in the whole

world. And we can't begin to see where the story of Christianity is going unless we learn how it is growing in places a long way from Willow Glen.

It is my hope that seeing how differently Christ is worshiped around the world will help us to navigate our world. Learning how the Gospel has adapted to so many different cultures can help us learn how to adapt to our changing culture. Tradition doesn't look nearly so traditional and our definition of tradition becomes much more flexible when we take a longer and broader view.

We are at the start of a new year, and I'm confident that we will see many changes here this year. We always do. But if we can see the changes in our church and in our lives as the unfolding of God's plan for us, hidden for ages but now coming to light, then we will be able to see God's glory shining through everything we have to do.

We are not so unlike the magi. Now I don't know what they took away from their encounter with Jesus. But I do know that they were changed. They offered their gifts and then, being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. [Mt 2:12] The magi had to alter their route, choose a different path. They had to find another way home. And that's another way to say that when they got home, they weren't the same people they had been when they left.

We now know who the magi are; they are us. So as we journey through 2015, I pray that each one of you has some kind of magi-cal encounter with the divine. I don't much care when or where or how it happens. But I do hope that the experience will cause you to choose a different path, go home by another road, so that you can discover something about the Gospel you didn't know before and something about you that has been hidden in God until now. 2015 could be the year that

God's glory is revealed to you and in you. In the words of
Isaiah: "Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of
the Lord has risen upon you." [Isaiah 60:1]