

January 6, 2008

They Set Out...

History is bounded by birth and new birth, by the virgin birth of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus – life, life and more life. But between those two life-giving moments there is also death, death and more death. When we are born we find ourselves in a world in which death and dying are major preoccupations; when we are born again it is still the same world. History consists of what happens in this world. History is the accounting we make of the human endeavor. The birth of Jesus provides our entrance into the reality and meaning of creation: this is the world of the Father revealed by Jesus. Jesus shows us that creation is something to be lived, not just looked at, and the way he did it becomes the way we do it.

-Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays In History*, p.134

To think as a Christian is to try to understand the stellar spaces, the arrangements of micro-organisms and DNA molecules, the history of Tibet, the operation of economic markets, toothache, King Lear, the CIA, and grandma's cooking- or as Aquinas put it 'all things' – in relation to that uttering, utterance and enactment of God which they express and represent. To act as a Christian is to work with, to alter or, if need be, to endure all things in conformity with that understanding. – Nicholas Lash, Prof at Cambridge University, a Catholic Scholar

In a parallel way, the death of Jesus provides our entrance into the reality and responsibilities of history: mostly, but not always, it is a mess: the daily round of failed plans, disappointed relations, political despair, accidents and sickness and neighborhood bullies. In this same mess of history in which we find ourselves, Jesus found himself. The remarkable thing is that he embraced it. – Eugene Peterson p.137

The biblical way is not to present us with a moral code and tell us, "Live up to this," nor is it to set out a system of doctrine and say, "Think like this and you will live well." The biblical way is to tell a story that takes place on solid ground, is peopled with men and women that we recognize as being much like us, and then to invite us, "Live into this..." - E.P. p.140

Today's story... Reading from Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2008

In contrast to the angelic appearance recorded for us in the Gospel of Luke, today's account found in Matthew presents us with people *not needing an announcement, but rather confirmation* of the details of the great, ancient saga they were participants of.

- The angels said to the astounded shepherds, “And this shall be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” In contrast, the learned ones from Persia came saying... “we’ve seen his star at its rising.” These scholars from the East – even though it wasn’t *their* story – were aware of the Jewish story of the promise of a Messiah. It is not recorded for us, but the eastern travelers reveal to us their knowledge of the Jewish promise by their recognition of this star as something significant.
- (Zabi)
- Our family’s discussion about the desire to better know the stories of the Bible – both of the first and second testaments.
- Numbers 24:17 (Mesopotamian diviner – Balaam) in the oracle given to him to speak to King Balak of Moab.
 - “The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear, the oracle of one who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered: I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near- a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel: (time of Moses) See other imagery from Jewish Scriptures *ABD infancy narratives p.412 III*

Another of God’s ironies...Shepherds within a night’s walking distance of Mary and Joseph were completely unaware of what was happening in a nearby stall. On the other hand, foreigners from another land and culture, another religion and language had already been traveling, setting their camels and pack animals in the direction of Judea.

The shepherds received an astonishing visit from angels who told them where to go, whom to look for and what to expect...in contrast the Magi from the East came asking...we know that we’re close, but from here, where do we go to find the child who has been born King of the Jews?

January 6, 2008

They knew that they were close, that they were looking for a child, and that they were looking for a child born King of the Jews. Interesting, but not at all surprising the magi from the East upon nearing what seemed to be their destination went to Jerusalem – nine miles north of Bethlehem. These travelers were accustomed to finding themselves in the courts of kings... remember Balaam again...

They were powerful figures...and they easily gained access to King Herod...I wonder what would have happened if the shepherds had first sought out the King and the church leaders for confirmation of what the angels had announced to them.

The Wise Men didn't first check out King Herod's feelings about this king, waiting first to see if they could "read between the lines" before they expressed their posture before this newborn...In one swooping statement we read that they inquired of Herod's whereabouts due to the appearance of this prophetic star and quickly stated their purpose...not testing the political waters, they made known that the point of their pilgrimage was to bring them before this newborn king so that they could pay homage to him...it wasn't in Herod's house that they open their treasure chests, it was only later are we told that they opened their treasure chests filled with the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

What about this visit from Herod's point of view...he arranges for a consultation with the chief priests and scribes. Maybe they revisited the words from the prophet Isaiah, but these exciting words of prosperity didn't include exact location of the promised one. But then for the needed details someone remembered the words of the prophet Micah, "But you, O Bethlehem...from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule Israel..." Walter Brueggemann writes, "The narrative of Epiphany is the story of two human communities: Jerusalem, with its great pretensions, and Bethlehem, with its modest promises. It is amazing that the wise men do not resist Bethlehem, but go on to the village. They reorganize their wealth and learning, and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.

January 6, 2008

After the visit with the dignitaries in Jerusalem...the astrologers *set out* toward Bethlehem... and as *they set out* “there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising”... *they set out*...this phrase catches my ear... perhaps weeks before, the kings had started their journey from their homes in Persia...each and every new morning they set out on the next leg of their travels...trusting in the words of prophecy and the sign of a celestial body. In Jerusalem, they conferred with others of their rank and privilege and once again “they set out.”

At this point in the narrative we might naively believe that King Herod was genuine in his desire and interest in finding this little one even though the narrator of this account lets the reader know of his fear and the fearful repercussions of a threatened leader. Yet, the travelers from the East...in our western tradition numbering 3, in the eastern tradition numbering 12, had whatever stirrings their intuition may have had confirmed by notice through a dream not to return to Herod, but to return to their own country by another road.

They set out. They followed the sign. They found the Christ child and they were overwhelmed with joy **and then**, they returned home by another road...

- What does this new year mean for us as we once again... “set out” from familiar places?
- As we travel, what signs guide our steps? Are we willing to make adjustments in our expectations of how we’ve always thought things to be?
- As we “return home,” how are we changed by our experiences on the road?
- May we be open to follow Christ’s leading Light.
- May we be conscious of dreams and the insights of strangers.
- Fear, yes what about fear as we travel?...think of the times that fear dictated our first response? to something new, even to something promising? What was it that we found fearful? In coming alongside of destructive persons; **note the movement from fear to fury, even as they impart needed traveling information.**
- May we make room in our lives for “overwhelming joy?”
- May we recognize that we travel with treasures (God’s gifts)–

January 6, 2008

- May we carry them carefully, but not so tightly and safely packed so that they are unavailable to us when we encounter the image of God in our brothers and sisters all around us.
 - James Alison (Catholic Priest) – “We are taught by the Magi to value the One who lies in the manger. With each of their gifts we are offered a way to shift the weight of our heart in an unaccustomed direction. When the Magi offer him gold, which indicates a king, we are invited to lessen the tribute we offer to the power structures to which we belong and on which we depend; when they offer him frankincense, which indicates a priest, we are invited to tiptoe out from under the delusions of our sacred canopies, to be drawn into the jagged-edged sacrifice of presence that this Priest will carry out; and when they offer him myrrh, which indicates a prophet’s death, the magi invite our hearts to lighten as that which deadens us loses its hold over our drives and desires.” *Christian Century*, Dec. 25, 2007

Closing words from W. Brueggemann, “Off By Nine Miles”

Epiphany is a good time to take a journey. The way is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.

AMEN