

Sermon Notes
“Magi-Culture-Church”
Brian Walton

Here we are at the last Sunday in St. Martin’s Advent journey. Next Sunday we celebrate the eve of Christmas. For four weeks we have been looking at characters from the first Christmas story to see how they connect with life in the 21st century. Today we consider the visit of the Magi. In this story, often reserved for the Sundays after Christmas, we meet three strangers who seem to use astrology to arrive at Jesus’ cradle.

When I think about the Magi I cannot help but remember the school yard adaptation of their Christmas hymn: “We three kings of Orient are; tried to light a rubber cigar; it was loaded; and exploded; that’s how we travelled so far.” In my study this week I learned that there is no evidence that these three were kings save for the costliness of their gifts. It seems much more likely that they were Persian star-gazers who ended up following astrological signs and Jewish legend to the Bethlehem stable. Clearly they did not possess a rubber cigar; however; events did “blow up” in a disastrous way as a result of their travels. The Roman King Herod who ruled Israel with a bloody hand learned of their mission and, fearing that a political rival had been born, ordered that every male child near Bethlehem be put to death. Like modern genocide, this decree caused people to flee, including the holy family who escaped home through Egypt.

In our November staff meeting we concluded that the story of the Magi offered us an opportunity to think about the relationship between Christian faith (represented by the babe in Bethlehem) and the wider culture (represented by a Roman Emperor and Persian astrologers). Put

more simply, does our culture have any interest in the church's message and, if it does, what does the church have to say to the culture?

It appears that a large portion of the culture is not interested in this question. Most people are simply indifferent to the church. Beginning with the anti-authoritarian movements of the 1960's the Christian church began to lose its privileged place in western culture. Where church attendance was once considered an essential of civilized society, necessary for acceptance and even upward mobility, current churchgoers - like you and I - often seem quite odd to our friends. Those of you gathered here this morning know only too well that most of your family and friends are likely sitting in their pajamas enjoying a second cup of coffee or scouring the aisles of Walmart in search of bargains. Church is not even on their radar.

While this may be true for the majority, there are still those represented by Herod and by the Magi. Herod, of course, is a threat to the Christ child and the sentiment of Herod still prevails among some segments of our culture. What comes to mind are those local critics of anything Christian who want to eliminate the word Christmas from our vocabulary, dismantle public manger scenes and do away with faith-based hospitals and separate schools. Although I imagine these critics are driven by a personal agenda, I have some sympathy for those who are skeptical of Christianity. News reports readily identify Christians with "abusers, homophobes or white supremacists" and give little media attention to Christians who are care-givers, justice-seekers and mystics.

Here and there throughout the world there are more extreme reminders of the "Herod power". In the theologically conservative, yet credible news magazine Christianity Today, it was recently reported that

over 215 million Christians throughout the world experience persecution because of their faith. Imprisonment, loss of home and assets, and even death can be the consequence for following Jesus. Christian persecution is reported to be at its worst in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Mali. In India, at least forty persons per month report harassment, threat or injury because of their Christian faith. Twenty-Three Christian leaders in Mexico and four in Columbia were reported killed this year. The article concludes that it is common for tottering governments to gain support by scapegoating Christians in a form of ethnic cleansing. Yet, in other instances, it is the Christian commitment to justice that threatens entrenched power. We have but to recall the persecution of South African Bishop Tutu, the bombing of black churches during the civil rights era, or the assassination of Arch Bishop Romero by El Salvadorian death squads, to know that the Christian message of “justice for all” is still perceived as a threat by modern-day ‘Herods’.

More in line with the Christmas message are those individuals who, like the ancient Magi, come to the church with curiosity and hope. Over the last few weeks I’ve had the opportunity to speak with many people who, in one way or another, have come out of the culture to St. Martin’s wondering if the Christ child has any meaning for their lives. I was delighted when a young retiree appeared in my office wondering how he could deepen his connection to the church. In some respects, he had fulfilled the cultures goals – he has a keen intellect, an active lifestyle and has completed a very successful career. Having reached the cultural goal of early retirement with lots of life yet to live, he wandered into the church open to exploring the more intuitive side of his life and hoping to make meaning through service

to others. A member of our church family who regularly counsels the weary reported that she frequently meets clients yearning for a place of welcome and spiritual renewal. Perhaps the youngest person with whom I communicated honestly declared that he didn't feel he fit in the dominant culture and welcomed the opportunity to be in a place that tended to things of the spirit.

And so, I took a question to the Spiritual Conversation groups this past week. "Why are you here?" I boldly asked them. "It is likely that many of your friends or co-workers, your children or other family aren't in church – why are you?" We are the United Church of course, so the responses did not include conversion experiences. In fact, the most common response to my inquiry was – community. I feel welcomed, I feel like I belong, I have friends here. From the former Roman Catholic who was awed by the welcome she received during the passing of the peace, to the senior citizen who noticed and worried when her lifelong friends missed a Sunday – being in community was a consequence of following the Christ child. It appears that modern people, in the United Church at least, come to the manger as much to find companions on the journey, as to arrive at a destination.

Then there was the other answer to my question, "Why do you come to church?" If "community" was the first and clearest answer, the second response lacked the specificity of a single word and was often accompanied with pauses, ponderings and appeals to the heavens (i.e. looking up into the distance). I am left to find a word to describe this secondary response. Perhaps the word is 'mystery' although in our tradition it might better be called, 'mystical'. The definition of mystical that

arose in my conversations included: “it’s something about the music; I just feel warm; there’s this kind of power; I don’t know why but all of a sudden I’m crying; it feels like home; calm, inspired, connected, holy.” And that’s the United Church; and you know I’m delighted by it. I’m delighted that this ancient story of a babe in a cradle revealing the divine mystery of life (which no historian can even prove to be true) still calls to us, still nurtures us, still equips us for the world.

Perhaps the task for those of us who still sit around the manger is two-fold. First, we must continue to disturb those who hold “Herod-power” and challenge them with “God-power”. We must continue to challenge others (and ourselves) when greed, oppression or self-interest threatens human life. Second, we must hold the doors of our church wide open for those who are looking for some community and companionship, some sanctuary and some mystery. We are no longer the centre of cultural life – that has been given over to shopping malls and hockey rinks – but we can be this strange little community who still desires a commonwealth for all and who still believes in a reality greater than personal striving. If we can be that place, then we will keep faith with a teen Mom, a confused husband and a crying baby, who some twenty-one hundred years after his birth, still influences how we live by revealing how to make and keep life holy. Amen.