

January 3, 2010

Matthew 2:1-12

“Jesus, the Light of the World”

At 10:30 on Christmas morning, Patrice and I took off from Detroit Metro airport on a Delta Airlines flight to visit our families in Allentown Pennsylvania. At noon an Islamic suicide bomber tried to blow up a Delta Airlines flight that was preparing to land at Detroit Metro by igniting chemical explosives that he had smuggled onto the airplane concealed in his underwear.

When I opened the newspaper the next morning, I was shocked to discover how close we had come to having our Christmas reunion disrupted by a terrorist attack. If our flight had been scheduled to take off an hour and half later, our departure from Detroit would have been delayed for hours as investigators tried to determine how security had been breached by a young Nigerian who boarded a flight from Amsterdam with explosives strapped to his body.

The first group to issue a statement about the terrorist attempt was not Al Qaeda, or Homeland Security, or Delta Airlines. It was the Islamic Community of Detroit. They immediately denounced the suicide bomber's actions and assured the public that Islam is a peaceful religion that does not condone terrorism. They felt the urgent need to disassociate themselves from the Islamic terrorist in order to avoid the kind of hostility they experienced after the September 11th attacks on the twin towers when every Muslim was viewed with suspicion and contempt.

I felt a deep sadness when I read their disclaimer. When a Christian goes on a rampage indiscriminately shooting and killing family members at home, or students at a high school, or employees in an office building, no one from the Christian community ever feels compelled to speak out and assure the public that Christianity does not condone the slaughter of innocent people. Even though Jesus is quoted in Luke's gospel as saying, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple, (Lk 14:26)" no one in their right mind would claim that Christianity encourages violence towards people who refuse to take up the cross of Christ. And yet we are suspicious of all Muslims because of the violence of a few radical extremists.

Well today as we celebrate Epiphany - the revelation of Christ as the light of the world - the familiar story of the Journey of the Magi has important lessons for us as we engage people whose religious convictions are different than our own.

As recently as the last century, most Christians understood that the world wide mission of the church was to convert everyone to Christianity. At the dawn of the twentieth century, John Mott published his famous book, "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation." Different strands of Christianity have taken different approaches to carrying out that mission. Some of us felt it was enough just to make the gospel accessible to everyone in the world, so we made sure that the Bible was translated into every known language and organized the American Bible Society to print and distribute copies of the Old and New Testaments all over the globe.

Others of us felt that just distributing Bibles wasn't enough. People also needed to hear the preached word in order to help them interpret the gospel and apply its truths to daily life, so we sent missionaries out to proclaim the gospel in every corner of the world. Others of us felt it was more important to follow Jesus' example and demonstrate God's love for the poor by organizing and supporting health clinics, hospitals, and schools in impoverished areas of the world. But regardless of the strategies we adopted, beneath them all was the hope that one day everyone would see the light

and become faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

But our Epiphany text for today offers a very different understanding of what the revelation of Christ as the light of world might mean.

In our gospel lesson, Matthew tells us about astrologers (*Greek*: magi) from a foreign land to the east of Judah who noticed a star in the sky and interpreted it as a sign that God was entering the world in a new way. The text says that they followed the star to Jerusalem and were eager to discover this new thing that God was doing. The magi were not afraid or threatened or suspicious. They were curious.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, King Herod consulted his biblical scholars who directed the magi to Bethlehem, the city of David, because the prophets had long ago promised that an heir to the throne of the greatest King ever to rule over Israel would come from David's ancestral home. And so the magi made their way to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and Jesus, their first born son. And this is where the story gets really interesting.

The magi did not deliver any religious pamphlets to Mary and Joseph. They did not preach to them or try to convert them to their own religion. They didn't threaten Mary or Joseph or warn them not to make religious claims about their baby that weren't sanctioned or approved by the proper religious authorities.

But neither did the magi forsake their own faith and convert to Judaism when they found the Jewish Messiah. They didn't ask to be circumcised, or claim Abraham as their spiritual ancestor, or seek tutoring from Torah scholars. They knelt in homage and presented precious gifts honoring the revelation of God in the child born in a manger. And then they returned home by another road.

Though we never hear of the magi again in the Biblical record, they were undoubtedly inspired by their pilgrimage to Bethlehem. They must have had long conversations with each other on the way home about the meaning of this new revelation. Every spiritual pilgrimage changes us and moves us into a deeper awareness of God's presence among us. But no one in the story Matthew tells in the second chapter of his gospel was converted. The magi didn't convert Mary and Joseph to their religion and they didn't convert to Judaism after meeting "the child who has been born 'King of the Jews.'" The visit of the magi wasn't about establishing the supremacy of one religion over the other. It was about bearing witness and paying homage to the new thing that God was doing in the world.

Now, in contrast to the curiosity of the magi who took tremendous risks to discover everything they could about this new epiphany, King Herod took the opposite approach. He was extremely threatened by the news. He was not interested in expanding his awareness of God. He was obsessed with preserving his own power and authority. Herod pretended to share the curiosity of the magi, but secretly planned to destroy whatever they discovered. Any new revelation was perceived by Herod as a threat to his security and he vowed to use whatever force was necessary to eliminate it.

Matthew tells us that when Herod realized he had been tricked by the magi, he ordered the slaughter of all Hebrew male babies born in the region of Bethlehem within the last two years. The very subjects he had been crowned to protect became the victims of his brutally oppressive security measures.

Today every time we encounter people whose religious convictions are different than ours, we must

decide if we will respond like Herod or the magi.

Whenever we feel our own security threatened, the Herod in us wants to immediately take whatever action is necessary to protect ourselves. We strike out at those who are different than us and close ourselves off to whatever truth they might have to share with us. We demonize those who come from far away places and treat with contempt people whose religious convictions are different than our own. We convince ourselves that the world would be a much better place if it was only populated by Christians.

But every year on Epiphany, the magi - foreigners from the east - arrive at the manger inviting us to let go of our insecurities and to set out in search of what new things God is doing in the world today. Instead of being threatened by what we don't understand, the magi invite us to share in their curiosity and discover what new truths others have to reveal to us.

When Islamic terrorists strike, it is tempting to react like Herod and strike out against anyone who might pose a threat to our security. But every religion gets corrupted by radical fundamentalists who want to impose their convictions on others by whatever means are necessary. If Christ is the light of the world, then we should be willing to search for the light of Christ in lives of faithful Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews. Epiphany is not about converting people to the one true religion. Instead it is about embracing the curiosity of the magi as we encounter those who know God by another name. Amen.