

Matthew 2:1-12
Jan 6, 2008

South Plains

The Joy of Light

All kinds of ingredients go into a merry Christmas: time with people we love, music that lifts our hearts, lights to brighten the darkness of winter, gifts exchanged with laughter, silence and stories as we remember the birth of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we prepare for these ingredients as carefully as we prepare a fine Christmas dinner. And sometimes they surprise us like the gift we never expected, but turn out to be our favorite. Whether we're prepared or surprised, the merriment of Christmas and the meaning of Christmas come home to us in one of those moments we call an "Aha! Moment."

Aha! I've found the right gift for the person I love.

Ahhhhha! How wonderful to see our family together again.

Aha! There's the Creator of the universe in the form of a baby lying in a manger.

When the wise men "saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Theirs was the joy of discovery, accomplishment, surprise, exhilaration, and relief. The journey was over. The mysterious path of the star had reached its destination. Herod's chief priests and scribes had been right. The child was born in Bethlehem of all places.

The joy recorded in verse ten can be seen from two different, but related viewpoints: From Matthew's perspective as a gospel writer, it was the joyous fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. From the perspective of the wise men, it was the joyous fulfillment of hard study and a risky adventure that comes to a good end.

First, Matthew's view of the nativity and his joyous "Aha!" The first gospel is especially concerned to assure us that the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection unfolds as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, the climax of God's history with the chosen people. Behind the story of the wise men coming from the east lies another story from our Old Testament. It's the odd little tale in Numbers 22, 23 and 24 of Balaam, a foreigner from the east who practiced the art of divination. Generally speaking, the Old Testament is dead set against anyone who practices magic or astrology or any of the dark arts that attempt to influence events outside the will of God Almighty. But, this is one time that God uses a Gentile prophet, an outsider for a holy purpose.

The story goes like this. Israel's army is on the march and enjoying victory after victory. As they approach the country of Moab, the king of Moab gets worried. He is afraid of the Israelites. He has seen how powerful they were in battle. So he sends for Balaam and asks Balaam to put a curse on the Israelite army. But, Balaam is a cautious pagan. He says he needs to sleep on it. At first, God came to Balaam in a dream and told him to stay home because the Israelites were

blessed. But the king of Moab insisted again and again until finally God gives Balaam permission to go with this king, but not to speak any curse. Balaam takes two servants with him, so there's a party of three coming from the east toward Israel. Do you see the parallel that fascinated Matthew? Much to the king's dismay, Balaam, this pagan prophet, not only refuses to curse the people of God, he actually blesses them. And, then he prophesies a king for Israel:

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 (Num 24:17).

It was that star that caught Matthew's imagination.

Matthew's joy in writing the story of Jesus' birth is the joy of a person who has studied the Hebrew scriptures long and hard in order to learn about the coming Messiah. Now, a child has been born under circumstances that coincide with this prophecy. Foreigners, like Balaam, have seen the star and recognized the presence of God in Jesus, the king of the Jews. Despite the opposition of a wicked king, they have experienced the blessing God intends. Matthew's "Aha" is the joy of discovering what God has done, the light has been turned on for Matthew; and this Gospel wants us to share that discovery. Matthew wants us to appreciate the careful planning and preparation that the Lord of history has put into the birth of Jesus.

There is nothing in the Bible to suggest that our wise men were guided by prophecy in scripture. They stopped in Jerusalem because that was the capital city and they were looking for a king. Probably they had never heard of the Hebrew Scriptures, and surely they did not know that the Messiah was predicted to be born in Bethlehem. Theirs was the joy of discovery and the satisfaction of accomplishment. They could have said with the A Team, "I love it when a plan comes together." But, the plan was in their heads or in their dreams. We know they were warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem to report to Herod, so apparently they were open to the influence of the Spirit of the Living God. But, they were little more than pious pagans, unbelieving seekers who show up at Jesus' birth out of a highly disciplined curiosity about religion.

Unbelieving seekers, curious about God, live in our neighborhoods. They worship in churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and shrines. We are both privileged and cursed to live in a time of religious intensity that all too often boils over in conflict. Part of the challenge to Christians in 2008 is to recognize those pious unbelievers whose vision of God's presence in the world overlaps with our vision of God in Christ. We cannot give up our commitment to the biblical message of salvation and our trust in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life. But, we can look for the intersection of Christianity with other faiths. We do this easily with Judaism and with the secularism of our culture. Many find points of intersection with the Buddhism of the Dalai

Lama. Only a few of us have had the courage to find places where Christianity and Islam overlap. Perhaps that is the next step, our peculiar challenge in 2008.

It is a move filled with risk and the dangers of misunderstanding. Both Christians and Muslims at their best are seeking peace. Both faiths have a history of violence against infidels. Both value the love of neighbor and we can point to times in history when they have co-existed in harmony. This is not one of those times.

For the sake of peace, we need to start looking for Muslims who fit the pattern set by Balaam and the wise men. We need to take the gospel writer of Matthew as our model and reject the frightened reaction of Herod who sought to kill the Prince of Peace because he couldn't stand the possibility of competition.

The birth of Jesus is good news for all the world, even for Gentile unbelievers. The light of the star of Bethlehem is a light for all peoples, joy to the world. Matthew begins the story of Jesus with outsiders paying him homage, kneeling in worship. He ends the story with Jesus' charge to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and "make disciples of all nations."

One of the critical ingredients of the joy of Christmas is sharing that joy with the whole world, giving the gift of the gospel and experiencing that moment that enables us to say, "Aha! I can see by the light in your eyes that we have both found the joy of Christmas."