

## **“Exploring the Political Implications of the Story”**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

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**January 6, 2019**

I have a number of memories of our trial weekend here almost ten years ago when I preached in view of a call, to use the old Baptist terminology, but some of the strongest memories are tied to the question and answer time on Saturday. Three questions stand out for me and all were quite appropriate, though I suspect all made some people anxious.

Bill Kibler asked me about my relationship with the WMU in my previous church. It was a bit awkward for me, knowing this church’s historic relationship to and my own positive history with the WMU, to have to say that prior to my moving to that church, it had replaced the WMU with a different approach to missions education and support. It was an “uh-oh” moment where all I could do was be honest.

Kent Goddard then asked me the question he asked every prospective pastor all the way back to Randall Lolley, an ethical question. If I lived in Nazi Germany and was housing a Jewish person when the SS came asking if there were any Jews there, would it be a sin to lie to them? I could sense some people cringing, but I loved the question, even though I gave a typically evasive preacher answer.

Finally, Carol Rockey asked me a question about preaching, whether I used the lectionary or chose my own topics, especially in the social or political arena. I noted that while I am not a lectionary fundamentalist, I use it the vast majority of the time and try to use different texts and themes. It is just one of many things I love about the lectionary. Since we begin with the text, there is a certain discipline imposed as to the issues we consider, though all preachers have biases.

So, one question on missions, a second on ethics and a third on homiletics, and all three good, solid questions... I have encountered far worse over the years. But in regard to this last question, as I noted at the time, one of the trickiest issues is that the either/or part gets collapsed in reality. If one follows the lectionary, which is shaped by the Gospel

readings, the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, one will inevitably deal with social and political concerns because the Bible deals with all of life as Jesus deals with all of life. God is concerned with and ultimately sovereign over all of life – the personal, social and political.

The story we have read today from Matthew 2 underscores this reality. This familiar story about the Magi from the East coming to see the young child Jesus offers us a symbol of the far-reaching nature of the gospel. Right from the beginning, Matthew wants the reader to know that the salvation Christ brings is not just for one group of people but the whole world. So, he appears to outsiders to the faith and region, representatives of the whole world. As we know, Matthew will end his Gospel with Jesus sending out followers to make disciples of all nations.

It is clearly a story about the nature of salvation, the hope this child will bring for all people on a very personal level, but as the story unfolds, it becomes equally clear that this child will unsettle things socially and politically. Even a cursory reading of the story reveals this, as King Herod is clearly unsettled at predictions of a new king, but a little background information makes the reality even more plain.

As most of us know, the visitors from the East are Magi, not kings as popular songs assume. We don't know how many of them there are. The number three is erroneously deduced from the number of gifts. And we don't know their gender. But most importantly, they are not kings but Magi, Zoroastrian priests. This is significant for two reasons.

First, they represent an ancient religion connected to a primary prophet, Zoroaster, who according to their tradition, was conceived by a fifteen-year-old virgin, and like Jesus, began his ministry at thirty after he defeated Satan's temptations. He also predicted that other virgins would conceive divinely-appointed prophets over time and his followers believed they could discern these prophets by reading the stars.

Second, they are Persian and Persians are a long-standing ally against the Romans both in religious and political terms. Any news of a new king would be unsettling to the old king, but that Persians appear on the scene, recognizing Jesus as some kind of kingly figure, both a prophet/messiah and a ruler, is highly significant for the local Jewish

community and their Roman oppressors alike. And that stories circulate about a virgin birth cannot help, given the specific expectations.

So, when the Magi come to Herod, talking about a child who has been born king of the Jews, Matthew says Herod is frightened and all of Jerusalem with him. He consults his advisors, priests and scribes, as to where the Messiah will be born, and they say Bethlehem. So, he sends the Magi to Bethlehem to find the child and asks them to tell him when they do, so that he can come and worship too. But the Magi weren't born yesterday. They find Jesus, present their gifts and worship him, but they do not return to Herod or communicate with him in any way. Warned in a dream of his malintent, they return home by another way.

Fortunately, Joseph is warned too, just after our reading today. So, he, Mary and Jesus leave their home and go to Egypt to get away from Herod. They are immigrants fleeing harm, undocumented aliens in a foreign land, and their fear is warranted. Herod finds out the Magi have left without reporting back to him. So, he has every child in and around Bethlehem two years old or under killed in an effort to get the Messiah.

So, a child is born, a Savior for all the world. Outsiders come to see him to underscore the scope of his salvation. But life is unsettled in the process. There are social and political implications of his coming. It's not reading politics into the story. It's simply reading the story as it is. Who Jesus is changes everything, every aspect of life. He doesn't just bring personal salvation, he transforms all of life, including social and political systems, but not everyone likes this, to say the least. Particularly unhappy are those who benefit from the status quo.

The message for us, it seems to me, is that we may need to rethink our aversion to all things political in the church. The old adage is to avoid talking about religion and politics whenever possible and never to mix them. And in churches like ours, churches that, generally speaking, benefit from the status quo, to say or do anything that even hints at a political implication is viewed to be inappropriate. But the Bible does not share this aversion nor does real life allow it.

Preaching a sermon on church/state issues from this pulpit on February 17, 1985, pastor John Lewis said this.

We've all been aware of the growing influence of strong religious forces that have moved into the political arena. This was particularly evident in our recent election, of course. I do not disagree with the President's statement that you cannot separate politics and religion. You really can't. The question is: How do you mix them? The question is: How do we relate our faith to our responsibilities as citizens? There is a relationship and has always been a relationship. The question is: How do we safeguard the individual liberty guaranteed to us in the constitution so that each one finds his own responsible way to express his patriotism and citizenship? (from "Keepers of the Dream" Matthew 22:15-22)

This was 1985, but I greatly appreciate a number of John Lewis' insights which seem relevant to this day and I will make the sermon available to you. But in just one paragraph, there are two key insights. We cannot separate politics and religion, but how we relate the two is critical.

So, if we are going to address political concerns intentionally and faithfully, how might we go about this task? We begin by understanding how critical the freedoms protected by the First Amendment are. This is where Lewis focuses. Early Baptists like John Leland fought for these freedoms. In fact, Leland almost represented Virginia at the Constitutional Convention of 1789, as a number of people tried to get something like Virginia's religious freedom act adopted at a national level, but in the end, it was deemed that some guys named Jefferson and Madison might pull a little more weight.

But Baptists passionately supported the free exercise clause and the non-establishment clause in the amendment, even if recent Baptist leaders like W.A. Criswell, either ignorant of or indifferent to history, have said things like, "I believe this notion of separation of Church and State was a figment of some infidel's imagination." That infidel would have been Baptist minister Roger Williams in the 1600's or Baptist minister John Leland or people like Jefferson and Madison. Baptists believed passionately in religious liberty because in Europe they had been denied it and they believed in non-establishment because they knew that if any religion was established, all freedom would disappear.

So, as we ponder ways of living out the social and political implications of the gospel, we need to respect the boundaries of church and state and this means first and foremost that we avoid being partisan, that is, supporting as a church any one party or candidate. We simply must not do that nor should we do anything that moves in the direction of establishing religion. This does not mean we cannot address issues of public concern. It simply means we cannot do so in a partisan way.

But this is not the only thing to consider as we address public concerns. When we do so as a church, it ought to be out of a compelling sense of Christian conviction, as if our faith demands that we speak or act. As individuals, we are entitled to be involved in any way the law allows for. Citizenship is a noble pursuit, despite the tainted nature of current political realities. But when we speak and act as a church, our passion needs to begin with gospel concerns.

It is often said that Martin Luther, when being investigated intensely at the Diet of Worms, said, “Here I stand, I can do no other.” It is not clear whether he actually said that, but the statement reflects his posture. The concerns he fought for in the way of reformation were passionate outgrowths of his faith in Christ and understanding of scripture, not some passing fancy or personal idea. He could do no other. That kind of passion ought to drive our public involvements.

I think of the work this church did, with Dr. Lewis’ leadership, during integration and the civil rights era. Integration wasn’t just a political venture, it was a basic human concern, and church leaders who fought for it were expressing their faith, their belief that God values all human life and thus there should be no discrimination based on race or anything else. Those who entered the public arena could do no other!

I also think of many issues today which many faithful Christians address out of deep conviction, issues like access to healthcare and education, basic human rights, food and shelter security, and the rise of racist and anti-Semitic sentiments. These are concerns for Christians to address not just through private faith but public action. In like manner, the way immigrants are treated is high on this list of concerns.

Everyone wants border security, even if we don’t agree on how to provide it or even understand current realities, but we still have a calling

as Christians to welcome the stranger in our land. It's about the most frequently-named commandment we find in scripture beginning with the Torah and ending with Jesus, who once was a stranger in Egypt, and who says that whoever welcomes the stranger welcomes him.

We live in a time of unprecedented global migration. The way forward is not simple. There are competing concerns to balance. But somewhere in the mix we have to speak up as people of faith for the stranger, the immigrant, the refugee, many of whom we already know through our clothing ministry and other endeavors. This is not a hypothetical issue for us. It is people we see and care for every week.

But the more I say about this issue, the more obvious it becomes that there is one other concern for public expressions of faith – people of genuine conviction will not always agree and that's "O.K." As a wise rabbi once said, anyone who takes the courtroom oath and says, "I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth," perjures him/herself because no one knows the whole truth. We all see only in part. So, we may get something wrong, and some of our brothers and sisters may have a different way of living out the same conviction.

This reality ought not stop us from speaking out of our conviction and then respectfully listening to others, though it ought to add some humility to our discourse. And the fact that we have differences about things that matter should not damage our relationships. We go to ballgames and cheer for opposing teams and remain friends, most of the time... Can we not differ on public concerns and still care about each other? Think of the help we might offer our culture if we could do that, not get along because we agree never to talk about our differences, but dialogue about our differences and allow all to live out their faith.

So, I will continue to preach from the lectionary and consider the wide range of issues the biblical texts address – healing and wholeness, suffering and evil, Christology and Providence, salvation and eternal life. But from time to time I will bump up against issues of social and political concern because they are deeply embedded in the texts and they matter to people around us. Such is the nature of faithful preaching and Christian life. No aspect of life is off-limits to God or God's people.