

“Right Under Our Noses”  
Matthew 2:1-12 – January 4, 2009

INTRO: The wise men or magi, are generally the last ones who come on stage in a typical church Christmas program. We see the holy family, the shepherds with their sheep, perhaps an angel, and finally the wise men. “But in Matthew’s gospel, they are the first ones—perhaps the only ones who come to Bethlehem seeking Jesus (according to this gospel). Matthew says nothing about shepherds or angel choirs. Instead, foreign astrologers are the first to worship Jesus.” (Nancy Koester)

When I was in seminary, I had the good fortune of living in a seminary apartment, within walking distance of the seminary. There were about forty apartments in that building, and there were first year students working on their Master’s Degrees, all the way through some students who were now working on their PhD’s. I lived on the second floor, right about in the middle of the building, and many times I can remember walking home to be greeted by the wonderful smells of somebody cooking food. I was usually envious, because I might not have had a clue what I was going to fix for supper. And I was often intrigued with the smells. You see, this wasn’t just brats and hamburgers, it was garlic and ginger and all kinds of spices whose names I didn’t know. The sad thing wasn’t that I never got to taste that food, but that I never got acquainted with the people who cooked it. Unfortunately the few Korean students that we had in school at that point (which is not the case now because there are lots of Korean students at G-ETS)—well, then they kept to themselves, and sadly, so did my friends and I. Right under my nose were those amazing foods I missed tasting, and those people I missed getting to know.

Ted Loder, a United Methodist pastor from Pennsylvania, has written a story appropriate for this season, entitled “Under Their Noses.” I’d like to share some of it with you. It’s written from the perspective of one of the workers on that journey with the wise men.

*The three men who hired me as a tent bearer for their journey studied the stars like nothin’ else mattered. They spent most of their time lookin’ at the stars, talkin’ about ‘em, arguin’ about old scrolls and maps like they held the secrets of life. I am sure that is a good thing, since their plottin’ and plannin’ got us to the place we were tryin’ to get to. But, I think, studyin’ the stars can also lead you off the mark if you look at ‘em too long. And if you look at only the stars, they put you in a kind of trance. You lose touch with other important things. You just don’t see those things, you miss ‘em. And that is not good—for the things missed or the ones who miss ‘em....They seemed to live in one world—the world of stars and supposin’. But we lived in another—the world of earth and people. When they needed us, they just took for granted we’d be there: cookin’, cleanin’ up, takin’ care of what they must have thought was less important stuff. I bet it never dawned on ‘em to tell us what they were thinkin’ or what the stars were doin’ or where we were headed. Like I say, I don’t think they intended anythin’ mean or bad. They were just too taken up with the stars, I guess. They were so totally caught up in what they cared about that they didn’t see anythin’ else....I’m not sure those three men truly even saw the baby or, for that matter, the mother and father in that stable. I mean, they didn’t smile, or touch his cheek. It was as if, for them, that baby was really just as far off, as removed from the world as the stars they’d been so busy plottin’ about. Funny thing...to have come all that way and still have missed it. It’s not that those three were totally wrong, or anythin’. Or that lookin’ at the stars is stupid. But, that baby...his eyes were so wide open. And it seemed the whole time I was there, he was lookin’ so hard, strainin’ to see, like he’d never rest ‘til he’d seen everythin’, linked up with all there was.* (Tracks in the Straw, Tales Spun from the Manger)

The Christ Child “saw everything linked up with all there was.” The season of Epiphany, the weeks right after Christmas, that’s the time when we celebrate “that Jesus came for all people of all nations, of all races, and that the work of God in the world wouldn’t be limited to only a few.” (Dennis Bratcher)

It's the celebration of the Christ whose viewpoint goes much further than ours, and is able to link up the world. The wise men are appropriate reminders of this message, because they were the first Gentiles—non-Jewish people—to acknowledge Jesus as king. It's believed they came from far away—perhaps from an area south of the Caspian Sea. In heritage and world view, they were far removed from the Jewish folks of Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The Bible story calls them wise men, or astrologers. Scholars identify them as priests. Legend has told us they were kings and that there were three of them, because of the gifts they brought. Legend has also assigned them names and provided camels for their transportation, but that's not in the biblical story. These visitors from the East most likely practiced one or more religions. Yet they came to worship this child. This trio or duo or quartet of travelers presents the image that "this child isn't the exclusive property of any one nation or one religious tradition. He transcends all the boundaries we humans construct among ourselves. The wise men represent the future work of this child. They represent the way in which the gospel is received by persons of every nationality and race. This is a Christ who has universal relevance." (Myrna & Robert Kysar)

God came into the world for all people. In the visit of those astrologers we see that God comes to: those outside the majority religious community; to non-Jewish people; to strangers from another country. During Epiphany, it's a good time to think about whether we really believe that God is a God for all people: for people outside of organized religion; for people of a different faith than ours, for people in other lands

Are the ideas we have about religion, the church, our understandings about God—are they open-minded enough that they could be accessed by a variety of people? Are we open to the myriad ways our neighbors and communities search for God—or do we only recognize traditional paths to faith? Are we tolerant of those whose religious traditions are outside the Christian faith? And are we open and hospitable to immigrants or people of other ethnic backgrounds who are seeking a spiritual home?

I'm consistently surprised at those persons who identify themselves as Christian, and open-minded. I received a Christmas letter this year from someone who was so pleased that all the people in her husband's firm now, belong to their church. And I thought, how sad that she seemed to take delight in this, because the world is so much larger than those persons in one church.

Sometimes what self-identified Christian people may say, can cause us to shake our heads. I remember a few years ago when Christian broadcaster, Pat Robertson said that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's illness was a punishment from God because Sharon divided God's land. Robertson pointed out that it says in the Bible he shouldn't have done that. I was appalled and disappointed that this kind of "Christian" voice would be one many people would remember.

Compare Robertson's reaction to an essay I read, written by a Jewish person who has friends in Gaza—friends for whom she is greatly worried right now, and rightly so. The situation with Israel and Palestine is a very complicated one, complicated by the actions of Hama, and there are many ways to look at it. But this woman said "Why have we been unable to accept the fundamental humanity of Palestinians and include them within our moral boundaries. Rather, we reject any human connection with the people we are oppressing. Our rejection of 'the other' will undo us." (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 1/2/09, "Israel's 'victories' in Gaza come costly by Sara Roy)

Hers would be the kind of voice of a person of faith, I would hope we would listen to. Unfortunately, no matter who we are, or where we live, rejection of those we call the other, can be our undoing. "The point isn't to go to Africa or India," a missionary once said. "The point is to make your world bigger than you are." (*Homily Service* Jan. 1994)

When we look at our country, the people right under our noses, right next door, we're reminded of the pressing need to make our world larger.

Marcus Borg points out that "in the last thirty-five years, we have become the most religiously diverse nation in the world." (*The Heart of Christianity*)

“There are approximately 6 million Muslim Americans—as many Muslim Americans as Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined. There are 4 million Buddhist Americans—more of them than either Presbyterians or Episcopalians. And there are about a million Hindus in the US (about as many as the United Church of Christ.)” *(A New Religious America, Diana Eck)*

Marcus Borg asks: “does it make sense that the one whom we speak of as creator of the whole universe has chosen to be known in only one religious tradition, which just fortunately happens to be our own?” *(The Heart of Christianity)*

Personally that doesn’t make sense to me, and in fact, is rather presumptive. I believe that whether people make their way to Christ’s manger or not, his birth and his life and his way, teach all of us volumes about how to live together on our different paths to God. Christ came into the world to enlighten us, and one of the ways his light is shared, is through the tolerance we can have for one another.

There is a “Peanuts” cartoon in which Linus is listening carefully as his sister Lucy, boasts about her religious faith. Lucy says to Linus: “I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion.” Linus asks: “How did you do that?” And Lucy replies: “I hit him with my lunch box.”

How many thousands of times, do we metaphorically hit someone with our lunch box—or literally mock them or worse still, kill them, in the name of religion. The one who “saw everything linked up with all there is” would have us draw our circles wider.

A psychiatrist once pointed out that the image of a circle fits in well with Epiphany—drawing larger and larger circles that take in more and exclude less. “We can draw larger circles by remembering that a circumference is related intimately to the radius of experience. We start with ourselves, with the center of life in God. Whatever risks we take are the pens and markers we need to draw larger and larger circles.” *(Homily Service, Jan. 1994)*

What’s right under our noses may be the larger world of people out there. Whether it’s differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, class OR yes, religion—the Jesus who came into our world came into ALL the world. His spirit of love and compassion could go a long way to enable us to live together, to respect each other, even in the midst of our differences.

--Sue Burwell