

Almost Missing Jesus

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday, (Jan. 7) 2018

Kyle Childress

Our reading from Isaiah 60 comes from almost 600 years before the birth of Jesus. It was told and retold, and recited again and again to Jews who were in despair, dispirited, depressed, and discouraged. It was a word of incredible hope to people who had given up hope.

These Jews were returning to Jerusalem after two generations in exile. The once great city, the center of their faith, their capital city, the center of their economy, indeed the center of their lives was a shambles when they came back. The walls were all destroyed. The great Temple was in ruins. Weeds were growing everywhere. Everywhere they turned, they asked themselves, “What are we going to do?” “How will we ever rebuild?” “Why did God let this happen?”

In the middle of this despair and ruin, this great poet and prophet says, “Look up! Arise, shine! For you light has come!” (Is. 60:1). “A new day will come! God is going to change things. Don’t give up! God will bring a new day, new prosperity; a whole new era. There will be markets again in the streets. The city will be rebuilt and it will be better than ever. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (v. 4). Kings will come and bring gold and frankincense and will proclaim the praise of God” (v. 6).

These imaginative words brought great hope to people in darkness.

Fast-forward 600 years – Matthew tells us that these wise men, these magi (sort of a combination of ancient scholar, astronomer, and magician) know this story from Isaiah too. In the 600 years since Isaiah 60 was a word of hope to people in despair, it had come to mean that when the Messiah comes, all this would happen. So these wise men from what is modern day Iraq and Iran read the stars, read the old Bible texts, and head to Jerusalem taking their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Jerusalem is where it all is going to happen. That’s where the Messiah is going to come, or as many believed, the Messiah would be a new king would come and bring the light of God into the world of darkness.

Except, these 600 years later, things in Jerusalem were different. No longer in shambles, the city was once again a great city, and more, there already was a king. Herod the Great, to be specific. And he wasn’t called “Great” because he was a nice guy. He gave himself the title “Great” because he was smart and savvy and ambitious and knew how to work with his over-lords, the Romans. As long as there was order and quiet and the taxes and tributes were delivered to Rome on time, Rome gave Herod extraordinary power to do whatever else he wanted. So Herod rebuilt the Temple larger and greater than ever. He built himself palaces and fortresses everywhere and helped remake Jerusalem into a major city once again. So when these magi show up asking about Isaiah 60 and new kings and the new day of God, Herod doesn’t like what he hears. He is the Great and he doesn’t need a new king who is greater. He’s frightened and he’s threatened.

He calls in his Bible scholars and says to them, “Tell me about this Isaiah 60 and gold and frankincense and myrrh and new kings coming.” And the Bible scholars say, “You’re reading the wrong part of the Bible. Isaiah 60 is important but it is not where you need to be reading today. It’s wrong. The context has changed. No longer is Jerusalem in shambles and despair. Now it has become

wealthy and powerful. You and the wise men in the next room are looking in the wrong part of the Bible because you still think that God is going to bless you rich and powerful types.”

Herod and his advisors say, “Okay, let me get this straight; you’re telling me that contexts change and therefore how we read the Bible changes with the context. So if you know so much what part of the Bible should I be reading in this particular context?”

And these Bible scholars, intimidated by Herod, swallow hard and say, “Well, you need to be looking in the book of Micah. Specifically, look at Micah 5:2-4: “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old ...”

Herod says, “I don’t like this talk of a new ruler but at least he’s coming from little old Bethlehem and not from here.” The Bible scholars swallow again, look at each other and explain, “Great King, but Micah the prophet foretells that this new ruler will be a different kind of ruler. He will be among the plain folk. He will be with the peasants. He will not be impressed with rich and powerful Jerusalem. The new sports arenas, the big banks, the giant hotels and resorts, the wealthy and elite are not what he will be about. He will be about hope and change among people who are poor and helpless; who are hopeless and without power. Micah says that the new king will turn swords into plowshares; that war will no longer be learned, and that every peasant farmer will have enough and no one will make them afraid” (4:3-4).

So Herod more threatened now than ever, tells the magi about Micah and these wise men need to head nine miles southeast to the little cross-roads town of

Bethlehem. He adds, “Oh, and when you find the new king, be sure and come back and tell me where you found him so I can go worship him.”

So the wise men go to Bethlehem and find the toddler Jesus and worship him. But being warned in a dream about Herod’s duplicity, they returned home a different way.

Epiphany, indeed all of Christianity, is the story of these two different ways of reading the Bible and understanding what God is about. On one hand there is Jerusalem, a faith of power and pretension: “God made Jerusalem (or Rome, or the Empire, or England, or America, or ...) great and our job is to remain great.” And there is Bethlehem, a faith of humility, hope, mercy, and grace. Like the wise men of old, we have to choose which faith we will follow.

Bethlehem is only nine miles from Jerusalem but there is a world of difference in the two ways of faith. Jerusalem is about believing God is going to bless us and keep us self-sufficient and powerful. It is a faith of self-congratulation. The key word is blessing. Jerusalem expects blessing. Expects entitlement.

But to go to Bethlehem we have to give up our pretensions. The key words are mercy and grace. Bethlehem is the way of humility. Bethlehem is where we are open to God, where we receive in gratitude rather than feel entitled.

And there is another thing contrasting Jerusalem and Bethlehem faiths. When Herod first hears of this birth of this new king, Matthew tells us he is afraid, and all of Jerusalem with him (2:3). Jerusalem faith is rooted in fear. Furthermore, when Herod learns that the wise men did not come back and tell him where this infant king was to be found, down in verse 16 we are told that he was enraged. There is much anger and rage mixed with fear in the Herod kind of faith.

In contrast, when the wise men get to Bethlehem Matthew tells us that they are overwhelmed with joy. Bethlehem faith is one of joy.

It is interesting to me that in our Bible story this morning, that the ones who were the church-going folk of the day – Herod and Jerusalem – misunderstood the Bible and missed Jesus. But the magi, the wise men, who were foreigners, who were not even Jews, were the ones who went to Bethlehem and who invite all of us to follow them. But it is easy to miss. The wise men almost missed Jesus. And it is easy for us to miss him, too.

A few years ago, I made that nine-mile trip. We went through the hills, with shepherds still watching over their sheep. We got to Bethlehem, still a small town, and made our way to the Church of the Holy Nativity – the oldest continuously maintained church in all of Christianity. It has a large square or plaza outside, yet it's surprisingly small and open inside – no chairs anywhere, no benches or pews. Over to one side is the cave, the site of the actual nativity.

To enter, you have to squeeze through and bow, stoop down through a narrow, five-foot door and down a few steep stairs. The room itself is small, about the size of the church kitchen, and over to one side is an alcove, a small niche, with a silver star with fourteen points that bears in Latin this lean assertion: “Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.”

If you wish to see it, you must kneel or crouch. You must be humble enough to bend. If we want to worship Christ, we have to bow.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.

Introduction to Worship:

I read an article some years ago saying that people in the South looked to the East Coast for their cultural cues, for art, for fashion, for sophistication, for exotica. People on the East Coast look to the Northeast, New England, for those same cues. They look to Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, Harvard and Yale. The article went on to say that New England has tended to look to England for its cultural cues and England has traditionally looked to France. I don't know where France looks.

The Bible looks eastward, too for cultural cues and exotica. Matthew says that Magi from the east came to worship the newborn king in Bethlehem. Scholars claim that the traditions and legends that have grown around these Magi are unsurpassed in the history of Christianity. These Magi were astrologers/astronomers/magicians/soothsayers/natural theologians. Over time we decided that they were 3 of them (probably because they brought 3 gifts), and we gave them names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. We also began to call them kings. We have even given them different colors and ethnicities, and saying they represented Asia, Africa, and Europe. The great New Testament scholar Raymond Brown cites a fanciful entry in an ancient saints' calendar in which the three wise men, having served as tireless champions of the gospel and now centenarians, meet for one last Christmas reunion in Armenia. After celebrating the Mass of the Nativity, the three magi die within days of one another.

One would expect Brown, the exacting exegete, to come down with a sledgehammer on such embellishments. Instead, he wryly observes that all this creative imagination and piety is pretty much exactly what Matthew hoped would happen. The exotic details invite us to imagine the unimaginable: that the God of

Israel has in generosity turned the face of mercy toward all nations, and that Magi from the East and people from Philadelphia and London and Paris all come and learn God's ways.

In other words, the story of the Magi cracks open the story to let us see that there is a place there for those who are near and even for those who come from afar.