

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Back Home”
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany of the Lord
January 3, 2010

Over thirty years ago, Raymond Brown, the now deceased Roman Catholic priest and New Testament scholar, wrote *The Birth of the Messiah*, a massive commentary on the two chapters in Matthew and the two chapters in Luke which contain the birth narratives of Jesus.

The book is a treasure trove of scholarly riches. Among its store of good things, there is a concluding 3-page section of Brown’s comments on today’s gospel lesson, the Journey of the Magi. The slim section is entitled “The Magi in Subsequent Christian Piety.” Sound exciting? It does sound bland, I know, but it is not. It is chock full of juicy stuff.

Brown begins the section, “The mysterious ‘wise men’ from the East caught popular Christian fancy earlier and more often than did Luke’s rather pedestrian shepherd-visitors to Bethlehem.” (1) With that introductory line, Brown is off to the races. The way that we often tell the story and display it in crèche scenes on our mantels, the shepherds and the magi blend together into a single audience, reverently assembled before the Holy Family. (2) The way that Raymond Brown tells it, it is as if he is a sportscaster doing the commentary for a NASCAR race, with the shepherds in one car and the magi in the other, the two of them vying with each for the lead as they head for the finish line in capturing the imagination of the church through the ages.

The magi are ahead for two centuries, being pictured on Roman catacomb walls during the second century. The shepherds edge up during the fourth century when they finally get their pictures posted on the catacomb walls too. But the magi hold onto a big lead—apparently their reputed remains, rumored to be intact, were circulated all around Europe as relics until 1162 when they landed in Cologne where you can still visit them today in a magnificently enameled shrine. The magi’s big lead was demolished by the Protestant Reformation, though, as the Reformers considered them to be too Popish!

Through the centuries, the imaginations of Christians worked overtime to embellish the biblical characters beyond the outline of Matthew’s narrative. We have sung “We Three Kings,” but it was the hymn writer and others who elevated them to royalty status, not Matthew. Then there is the matter of how many there were. The biblical script is silent on their number, but there were two in the catacomb art of St. Peter and Marcellinus; four in a different third-century catacomb; twelve (each with a name!) in some medieval Eastern lists before popular opinion settled on three, presumably because there is the mention of three gifts. Once they became three in number, they were given names, such as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. By about 700 C.E., they not only had names, but they were color-coded: Melchior was white-haired, Gaspar was ruddy-complexioned, and Balthasar was dark-skinned and heavily-bearded.

Raymond Brown calls what happened to the magi “Christian midrash,” midrash being the Hebrew term for the popular and imaginative exposition of the Scriptures for faith and piety. He goes on to comment that “this imaginative reflection on the magi is not too far from Matthew’s own intent. In the persons of the magi Matthew was anticipating the Gentile Christians of his own community. Although these had as their birthright only the revelation of God in nature, they had been attracted to Jesus; and when instructed in the Scriptures of the Jews, they had come to believe in and pay homage to the Messiah. Subsequent Christian midrash continued this process of coloring in the outline of the magi with hues familiar from the lives of Christians in later centuries.” (3)

What Brown is saying, if I read him correctly, is that he thinks that Matthew’s secret wish was that the story of the magi would so capture the imaginations of his Christian readers that we would never stop creating midrash, that we would never stop seeing ourselves personified in their story.

And so considering how it was with the magi who, having sought the One in whom God was pleased to dwell, having found him, then went back home, back from the wondrous, luminous, holy experience to their dinners, their wives, their books, and their dogs (4), we are invited to consider how it will be for us as we return from the wonder of Christmas to our homes, our offices, our classrooms.

Where have you sensed the wonder of the Christ child, the wonder of God’s holy presence in the midst of life, this season? Was it was in the magnificent solos and choruses of Handel’s *Messiah* which have been threaded through our Advent and Christmas worship? Was it in the sweet concentration of our pre-school singers who sang their hearts out at their Christmas program just as they had rehearsed or in watching the stamina of the teen-age angels at the White Gift Christmas Pageant who extended their arms in holy welcome for I-don’t-know-how-long-but-I-can-tell-you-that-I-was-truly-impressed or in the whimsical retelling of the Christmas story by the sheep and the donkey at the 4 p.m. Christmas Eve service. Was it in the soft, warm glow of candlelight that imparted a sense of life’s mystery and holiness which lies beyond the ability of words to express?

Now that you, like the magi, are returning from Christmas wonder back home to work and school and responsibilities, etc. etc. etc., how will it be for you?

Will you be at your desk, so overwhelmed and oppressed by your 2010 calendar and your to-do list that you don’t have time to drink in the wonder of the universe that God has placed just outside your window? Or will you view your desk as an altar where you might use your God-given talents well, attentive to the places where Christ is meeting you in the work that you do?

Will your mealtimes be times of separation where each person in your family grabs a plate and heads to a different part of the house, or worse, will they be arenas of quarreling and dissension, causing each bite of food, no matter how delicious, to taste as if it were seasoned with rancor? Or will they be tables of sacramental life and love and laughter and deep communion, as holy as the table from which we receive the bread and cup of Christ’s love today?

How will you react when there are failures in our government or any other of the institutions of our society, as there inevitably will be? Will these failures be an occasion for cynicism and contempt? Or will you react with resiliency and an awareness that human systems fail and bad things happen and we don't have to lose our heads and get hysterical every time they do (5), for we are those who place our ultimate trust in a loving God who beckons us to put our minds and our bodies and our prayers to work toward that promised day when God's vision of shalom, wholeness, peace is realized?

Now that you are back home, what new midrash will God's Holy Spirit write with your life this new year?

1. Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Image/Doubleday, 1979), 197. The bulk of information on what Brown terms "midrash" on Matthew 2: 1-12 in this sermon is drawn from pp. 197-200. I have also utilized some material cited in Thomas G. Long, "Bit Parts in the Christmas Pageant," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 1982, 14-21.
2. Richard T. Frazier, "Shepherds and Wise Persons," *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4, Winter 1996-97, 417.
3. Brown, 199-200.
4. Long, 19.
5. David Brooks, "The God That Fails," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2010.