

“The Party Is Over”
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Los Alamos, New Mexico
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Decorations are coming down, presents are being stored some ready for “re-gifting”. Christmas is over for another year. Yet, the celebration is not quite over yet, at least for the Church.

Today is Epiphany Sunday. In the Eastern Orthodox Churches today is the high point of the celebration, not December 25th. Our celebration follows the secular pattern that is based on the business cycle. Thus Christmas decorations go up long before Thanksgiving and come down the day after Christmas. The themes are buy, buy, and buy some more.

Liturgically the celebration of the birth of Jesus begins on Christmas Day and ends on this Sunday. The pundits cry “foul—they are trying to take Christmas from us” every time there is a dispute about a nativity scene or a Christmas tree in an airport. Yet, the real threat to Christmas is the commercial emphasis that

drives the season. Enough said---the party is almost over—not quite.

Today our text concerns the visit of the Magi. When I was growing up we put up a nativity scene. The scene always depicted the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and the Wise Men---all around the crèche. Once in a church the worship committee attempted to be more accurate and withheld the wise men from the nativity until after Christmas. The uproar was so great that we went ahead and placed the three wise men at the manger even though that is not what scripture says.

In reality there is a conflict between Matthew and Luke. The conflict concerns the dating of the birth. In Luke Joseph and Mary make the trip to Bethlehem because a census was ordered by the Roman Emperor. This census did take place but occurred around 6 A.D. Matthew has the birth of Jesus at the time Herod was ruling. Herod died around 4 B.C. Thus the first problem is a ten year difference in the dating.

The way around this is to see the stories not as history but as “gospel”. Each writer---and remember no other New Testament writer except these two, includes any reference to the birth of Jesus or to the birth of Jesus from a virgin----each writer uses the birth narrative to set the tone for his gospel.

For Luke he wants to emphasize how Jesus came for the poor. Thus the only ones who respond to the birth are the poorest of the poor---shepherds.

Matthew, on the other hand, wants to declare that Jesus is the Messiah BUT---- and a big difference---is that Jesus will NOT be like the Messiah or King people are expecting. Thus Matthew begins by relating a story in which Joseph must choose love (his love for Mary) over the God-given Law (that he should have her executed for adultery). Here, Matthew continues with the story of the magi.

So the question is this: what is Matthew trying to tell us in this story of the visit of the magi?

First in this story Joseph is not even mentioned. Mary says nothing. The visit occurred up to two years after the birth of Jesus. The family is living in a house---not a manger. The main characters in the story are the magi and King Herod.

The word “magi” has several meanings. In Luke’s work, “Acts of the Apostles” the word means “magician”.¹ The word might denote Persian priests, the “magians”. Some scholars suggest the word means “astrologers” and refer to this popular practice in the east. The interesting point is that the visitors who come to Jesus were not Jewish. They were “gentiles” and would have been the last group that we would expect would get a message from God.

The gifts have some significance. Gold has always been a gift given to a king. Frankincense was an oil used in the sanctuary and was viewed as “holy” perfume. Fragrant substances were also popular gifts for a king. So Matthew is saying that gentile astrologers brought gifts to a peasant couple that was fit for a king.

¹ Acts 13:6, Acts 13:8.

Herod plays a major role in the story. In Luke's account nothing bad happens with the birth of Jesus. In Matthew the birth of Jesus triggers a murderous assault by the King to protect his position and power. The birth of Jesus does not bring joy to the hundreds of parents who watched helplessly as their children were butchered. Joseph, Mary and the baby must flee their homeland and live in exile in Egypt to escape the wrath of a threatened king. Again Matthew suggests that the coming of Jesus does not necessarily bring peace and prosperity---but suffering and violence. Those who follow this new king may pay a heavy price for their faithfulness.

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As you know this Christmas we traveled to California to participate in my mother's funeral. She died on the 19th of December—the exact day my father died 29 years ago. I have done some reflection over the past few weeks and will do more in the future. Initially I want to share with you what I learned about faith from my mother.

My mother's family was not active in the church. She grew up in a family with five siblings. My grandfather, a veteran of World War I, returned to a mishmash of jobs. He was an ongoing victim of the Depression moving from job to job to support his family. In my years with him I thought it "neat" that he had been so many things. He had been a fireman, policeman, factory worker, taxi-cab driver, short order cook, and on and on the jobs went. I as a young child thought it was "cool". The reality was different.

On the other hand my father's family was steeped in the church. My father's father---my grandfather---was a well-known pastor and teacher in the Northwest. He was president of a bible college, professor of speech, and served large churches. A hall is named after him at Northwest Christian College and also at the last church he served in Santa Cruz, California. That side of the family lived the church and loved the church.

My father was the youngest by many years of the children. His two brothers graduated from college as did his sister. World

War II intervened diverting his brothers from their intended path to be doctors. One uncle died during the war and the other went on to a career in the Army and then with the Social Security Administration.

My father did not like school. He ended up dropping out of high school and went to work for a local Santa Cruz movie theater. My mother at the same time was forced to drop out of high school and get a job to help support the family. She went to work for the same movie theater. Their marriage was in a sense the merging of two worlds---church and non-church.

My mother seldom attended church. My father attended some but not much until I discovered an interest in faith. Some of my fondest memories are when my father and I began attending church together, joined the choir, and was elected deacons.

My mother once told a story about how she was ready to join the church. In the Disciples of Christ that meant that she would be baptized as an adult. Part of the reason was to fit into the church-centered family she was marrying into and part of it was because

she had a developing faith. She recounted how she was visited by a deacon from the church to talk about her baptism. The deacon noticed that she smoked. The deacon informed my mother that under no circumstances could she be baptized until she renounced smoking and under no circumstances would a smoker ever be allowed into heaven. My mother told him to take a hike. She never joined the church.

I am a curious mixture of those two families---when I think about it. I grew up on stories about the ministry of my grandfather Childers---who died the year I was born. Thus, when in college I decided to pursue ministry there was rejoicing from that side of the family. On the other hand from my mother and her side there was neither rejoicing nor disdain. It was not important.

Throughout ministry I have discovered that I am a curious mix of both. I have a love for the church and for God but I also have a healthy skepticism especially about things the church pontificates about. You see, that deacon was wrong---smokers will

be in heaven and I am confident that God loved my mother, even if she smoked.

In fact the church has been wrong about a lot of things. In the sixteenth century the church was very wrong when they arrested, tortured, and applied great pressure on certain people to recant and repent from their non-biblical views of the cosmos. The church taught, and the Bible says, that the cosmos was a place where the earth was center and did not move and the sun, moon, planets, and stars all revolved around the earth. When certain persons such as Galileo observed that it was not that way the church came down hard on them ---the church was wrong. Ironically in an institution that values repentance and confession some in the church only recently declared Galileo was correct and forgave him some four hundred years later.

The church was wrong when they tortured and executed persons such as John Wycliff for translating the bible from Latin into other languages such as English. People at the time believed that Latin was the language of God, Jesus, and the Bible. The

Puritans were wrong when they banned Christmas, executed women suspected of being witches, and executed people who were of a different Christian belief than they. Those who punished my grandfather---the one who was a minister---for writing with his left hand were wrong. The church believed and the bible taught that left handed people were being devilish and rebellious. They were wrong.

I suspect the church is also wrong about much that it pontificates about today whether about gays, creationism, politics on all sides, and so forth. I get from my mother nervousness about church pronouncements, church dogmas, church procedures, and want to ask---in love---why? For instance, I am presently a little skeptical about the Disciples of Christ when at their General Assembly this year suggested (indirectly but forthrightly) that one of the reasons the church is not growing is because its pastors are overweight.

I suspect that Matthew would be one of those skeptics and question askers if he were here today. I suspect that if we take him

seriously he would make us a bit nervous about the homogenized, sanitized, confidence with which we just know God and what God wants today. I suspect Matthew would be very nervous about the presentation of the gospel today as an answer to all our needs and problems. I suspect Matthew might be nervous about the call to arms some Christians are asserting against the people from where the magi came---people of the east, Muslims.

Matthew indicates that the gospel may create problems not solve them. He indicates that the God's intervention may lead to exile as it did with Joseph and Mary and may lead to sorrow as it did with the families whose children were slaughtered. Matthew might question the bows, ribbons, and gift buying frenzy where the value of love is determined by the size of the gift. Matthew might want us to learn that God works in mysterious ways, sometimes surprising ways, and often works outside of the boxes we create for God. Magi-gentiles were the ones who honored the new King. The king and religious leaders sought to kill the new spiritual king

and ended up killing a lot of other people. Mary, Joseph and Jesus were forced to flee into Egypt and live as “illegal” immigrants.

I am thankful for the love for the church that my father imparted and the skepticism of the church that my mother imparted. The star we follow may lead us to sacrifice, to heartbreak, but it will lead us to the God who loves us. On that score the church has it right, always has, always will---God so loves the world that God gave his own to redeem that world and to bring it into the light. That is the good news! The party’s over---or is it really just beginning?