

The Spirit at Work in Non-Believers

By: Penny Holste

January 6, 2013. Epiphany is the day we celebrate when the Gentiles came to learn of Jesus. Gentiles like us. Pastor Penny's sermon today is about the story of the Magi: why the writer of Matthew would include it in his gospel, and how God uses people with different faiths to reveal the truth even today.

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We begin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Well it is Epiphany, January 6th, a day when we remember that Jesus was shown to the non-Jews, to the Gentiles, to the wise men. And there are lots of traditions connected with this story, and we know them. Like if I said how many wise men were there, you would say three. Of course, it's not in the Bible. There were three gifts. No mention of three wise men. But you know, that's part of our tradition. Or if I asked you did they have names, you would probably say yes. Can anybody name one of the wise men? Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar? Wow, you guys are good! Again, that's tradition. That's not in the Bible. But you know, we have a lot of traditions. Well, here's something that might surprise you: were they kings? No. No, I just gave the kids crowns, but they really weren't kings. They were Magi. Now, long before Jesus the Magi were given maybe a royal significance in Persia. But in Jesus' day they were not. Our word "magician" or "magic" comes from the same root as Magi. They were not very highly regarded. They were stargazers. Some would say they were horoscope fanatics. I think today maybe eyebrows would go up, like maybe they do when people say they're a Scientologist or that they thought the end of the world was coming because of the Mayan calendar. These were not people of the faith of Judaism, and they were magicians. When Paul bumped into a Magi in the book of Acts he said, "You child of the devil, you are the enemy of every good thing." That's what he said. So we have to wonder, how did the Magi get into the Christmas story? Why would they be included at all? Why would God have guided them to find Jesus, and why would the writer of Matthew include this incident in the story of Jesus' birth?

Well, I think the first reason they're included is because the kingdom of God is for all people. So of course it is for them, too. But I think that the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical writers to keep this account in the story for people like us, because we are surrounded by people who do not believe exactly the way we do, people with different faiths from ours and sometimes no faith at all. They are our relatives, our neighbors, our fellow students. They are our coworkers. We are surrounded by people who don't share our faith. And I think that this account of the Magi is very helpful in avoiding two pitfalls. One pitfall is to resent people who have a different faith, to kind of be guarded about it, to maybe not want our children (if we're parents) to learn about the other faiths -- and that's not at all what we see God doing here. God used these men, who probably worship Zoroaster, to give a truth to the world. They were these pagans. They would have been called pagans in those days. These non-believers were the first people to realize that Jesus was a king, and the first people to fall down on their knees and pay him homage. We kind of like to think the shepherds did that, but there's no recorded event like that. These were the people who could look at this little baby and believe that he had the authority and power of a king. So God used people with a different faith to reveal the truth.

And I think that God continues to do that through all faiths today. I remember when I was a student chaplain in a hospital when I was in the seminary, and I was assigned to the oncology, the cancer ward, and I felt a great burden on my shoulders. I was visiting people who were struggling with life and death

issues, and I had this word of joy and hope. But how would one person convey it? And of course they had to be open to it. And then one afternoon, I was having lunch with a friend who was also a student chaplain. And she said, "I just went into the room of a woman who said she wasn't Christian, but I've never heard such words of grace. I didn't have to say a thing." And I thought, that's it. The Holy Spirit is already out there in that hospital, working with the people through different faiths. It's not all up to me.

And I think when we can set aside the political uses of some of the faiths in our world, we can see that God is using them to reveal truth. We think of the example of the Muslims, their commitment to their faith. They pray five times a day. They memorize the Quran from little on. We think of Native Americans, and how they are good models for us in how to take care of the environment, how to believe that it is God-given and not for us to abuse. We think about the great example of philanthropy in the Jewish Community, as can be seen by lots of Jewish names on different institutions and buildings in St. Louis. God continues to use people of other faiths to reveal the truth to all of us.

But then that can lead us to yet another pitfall, and that is to say then it doesn't matter. Don't we all worship the same God? Aren't we all trying to go to the same place? It really doesn't matter. But do we all look at God in the same way? Do we all understand God the same way? Because if you look into Islam, you see that Muslims view God very differently than we do. They see God as merciful as we do, but as a master, not a father. They have no understanding of God as a loving father, and they certainly don't understand that God would allow God's self to suffer and to die for us. And the way that they feel they have a connection to God is through their knowledge. And so they're never really sure how strong that connection is, because it really depends on how well they understand the will of God. And we, on the other hand, know that we can never connect ourselves to God because we are just basically in rebellion. So we rest entirely on the life and death and resurrection of Christ. And so we don't worry about our connection. We don't worry that we are not saved.

I assume that you, because you're here today -- and certainly I can say this for myself -- while we can revere and respect other religions, we feel that Christ has given us the best understanding, the best picture of God. And that's why we're here. And if that is true for us, and if we find in our lives that we are supported and comforted and allowed to be loving and kind people because of Jesus, then is it really right to just let other people who have never heard about him, or have fallen away from him, be on their own? I mean, should we really just say "to each his own" and "this isn't my business?"

Now, I'm not trying to say we should be knocking on doors with a Bible under our hand. What I am suggesting is that we look at what God did in the story of the Magi. God drew them to Christ using the thing they were already looking for. They were looking for knowledge through the stars. Well what are the people looking for that are surrounding us, that maybe haven't found the grace of God? Well we know, what we're all looking for. And if you come to church when it gets a little warmer, you'll drive by lots of people who are jogging and lots of people who are riding their bikes, because one thing we all look for is a healthy, balanced life. Another value of our society is certainly to be part of a community. We see how popular social media is. Because we want to be known. We want to have people know us and know them. And the last thing that I think is a value of our culture is that we want to have control. You know, we have lots of self-help books to get our lives in order. We have a lot of tools to organize our lives because we want control. And I think what we want is to know that the future is safe.

Now, all of those things -- a safe future, a need for community, a sense that there is a focus in our lives -- are given to us by Jesus Christ. So what happens is that our lives, the lives of all of us in this room,

are the stars that draw people to Christ, whether we realize it or not. Now I'm not trying to say that's because they're so perfect, but it's because as we live out what we've been given, people notice. People sense, for instance, that when you're under pressure at school or at work, that you handle it in a different way. You don't throw everything to the winds. You don't only concentrate on your work. You're still able to give your time to your family and to your faith and to your community. They see that, because God is working through us. They understand that we have a connection that maybe not everyone has. We certainly know that we're connected as a family of faith. But we also create community where we live and work and go to school, by the way we treat people, by the way we respect them. And people see that. And people also sense if we have confidence and hope for the future. In all of these things, it is God working through our lives to draw people to Christ. The only thing we really need to do besides living the way we live is to have, in our back pocket, a few sentences we might offer if someone asks us, "Why do you seem so calm? I wish I had the kind of optimism you do." And then we can explain.

The end of the story of the Magi says that they went home using a different route. They didn't go to Jerusalem because again the Spirit was working through these non-believers, and they knew that if they went back and told Herod where the baby Jesus was, he would not come to worship Jesus. He would kill him. So they went home a different way. I think that has a double meaning there. They went home with a different outlook on life. They came looking for a king and they went to the palace first, you remember. They came thinking there would be this child surrounded by riches and comfort, and they found instead a king willing to be a fragile, vulnerable baby in a poor family. And they must have realized this is the kind of king he would be all his life. He would always be one willing to give of himself. And of course he did. He gave up all those things that are near and dear to us: a balanced, calm life, the community, and even life itself, he gave up so that we would have it. And above all, so that we would know his love for all eternity.

Epiphany. It's the day we celebrate when the non-Jews, when the Gentiles came to learn of Jesus -- Gentiles, non-Jews like us. It is a day to celebrate.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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