

Nine Miles Off

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

First Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 10) 2021

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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 capitol city, the center of their economy, indeed the center of their lives was in 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 your light has come!” (Is. 60:1). “A new day will come! God is going to change things. Don’t give up! God is bringing 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, (that’s Magi not MAGA) – were a sort of a combination of ancient scholar, astronomer, and magician, and they 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 of these prophecies would come true. Isaiah 60 began to mean a kind of entitlement. “Of course, it all was going to happen in Jerusalem; where else could it 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 assuming that that was the place. That’s where the Messiah is going to come, and as many believed, the Messiah would be a new king who would come and bring the light of God into the world of darkness.

Except, these 600 years later, things in Jerusalem were different. The context has changed. 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 ambitious, with a thirst for power, and knew how to please his sponsors, 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 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’s in charge and is immediately threatened by a new king and a new order. He’s frightened and defensive.

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, your advisors, 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 buildings, the fancy hotels, 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 there will be justice and peace so 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 makes sure to add, “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 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. It is the faith of privilege and supremacy. The key word is blessing. But to go to Bethlehem we have to give up our pretensions, give up power, give up our guns, give up control, give up privilege and supremacy. 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 expect entitlement.

It is interesting to me that in our Bible story this morning, that most of the ones who were the church-going folk of the day – Herod and Jerusalem – misunderstood the Bible and missed Jesus. It was not enough to read the Bible, quote the Bible, or even hold it up in a photo shoot in front of the Temple, they still missed Jesus. While the Magi, the wise men, who were foreigners, and who not only did not go to church but were likely adherents of other religions, were the ones who went to Bethlehem and found the Christ-child. They invite all of us to follow them.

It is so easy to miss; it is easy to be off by only nine miles.

So how do try to make sure we do not miss Christ by only nine miles even though we're reading the Bible? Here are some quick reminders:

First, we always read the Bible and know God communally and relationally. We do not “lone ranger” it. When we enter the body of Christ through baptism, we have to rely on our sisters and brothers to teach us how to read, help us see where we are blind, help us understand, and help free us from our addictions to sin. That's how the Holy Spirit works – through each other. And this is an ongoing conversation that we never outgrow. Even when we read by ourselves, we know that our sisters and brothers are looking over our shoulder, sitting beside us, and across from us.

This raises the question: with whom do we read the Bible? If we're only reading with sisters and brothers just like us, we tend to be blind in the same ways and addicted to the same sins. This is the biggest problem with staying inside our social media silos. We only hear from people just like us. What we need is to read the Bible and worship and serve alongside sisters and brothers who are not like us. If we read only with other folks in Jerusalem, we'll repeat the same Jerusalem-like

interpretations and miss Christ. We want to learn to read with folks across the tracks in Bethlehem.

And this reading with others who are not like us includes those from across time, so we read with sixteenth century Anabaptists and seventeenth century Baptists. But also, twelfth century Franciscans and third century sisters and brothers in the catacombs and sixth century Syrians in the desert.

At the same time, we read with those from around the globe – with Christians in Africa and Asia, with small circles of sisters and brothers in a village in El Salvador or Cuba or a storefront in Philadelphia. Part of the job of Pastor Sarah and myself is to help you be in an ongoing conversation with Christians from across time and around the world. That's part of why we went to school and seminary.

And here is one of the insights from this story of the Wise Men – we also need to listen to folks even if they're not Christian. We might disagree on many things, but our job is to be humble enough to listen to how the Holy Spirit might be speaking to us from outsiders like a Muslim or Hindu or perhaps even an agnostic or atheist.

I tell this story while being mindful that apparently one of the conspiracy theories out there in cyber-space is that the world is secretly run by Lizard People who are aliens. The Nashville bomber a couple of weeks ago, was apparently a believer in these Lizard People.

With that in mind, author David James Duncan writes about a friend of his who went on a vision quest of some sort. This friend was new to all this and was disturbed by the dreams he had on the quest. It seemed that he was surrounded by a bunch of fearsome, remorseless Lizard People. They surrounded him and told him

that they controlled the entire world and prophesied that they were going to devour the whole thing. Upset, the friend went to see an old Brazilian shaman. After listening to the vision, the old shaman waved his hand dismissively and chuckled, “Those Lizard People! They think they run everything” (David James Duncan, *God Laughs and Plays*, p. 115).

I’m not in the habit of listening to Brazilian shamans but I do hear his insight: Sometimes we give too much power to darkness. Darkness does not run things. The Light of God shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it (John 1:5). So, we listen and learn.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer learned to listen to the Bible differently when he spent a year in New York City in 1930-31 and attended Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. Bonhoeffer said that’s where he learned that we read the Bible not only for ourselves but over-against ourselves. He explained that the Bible interrogates us rather than us interrogating the Bible (see Stephen Fowl and Greg Jones, *Reading in Communion*, p. 44-45).

When we listen and hear from the wider church around the world and across time, the Bible interrogates us, and that’s when we are humbled and open to God and open to the wider church enough that we might hear a new word, a counter word, a word that leads us that nine miles to Bethlehem.

Some years ago, I made that nine-mile trip. On a bus 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 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. It’s kind of dark and dingy, covered by the soot from candles that

have been burning since the 6th century. Over to one side, down near the altar, is the cave or grotto, the site of the actual nativity.

To enter, you have to squeeze through and bow, stoop down through a narrow, five-foot door, so narrow that you can barely get through it, then down a few steep, narrow steps. You immediately enter into this small, bright candlelit room, 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 simple assertion: “Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.”

I found myself with a Mexican pastor from Mexico City, three black pastors from North Carolina, and a female Lutheran pastor from Minnesota. Also, there was a German family from Munich and four French-speaking Nuns from Cameroon in West Africa. The German family started singing “Silent Night” or “Stille Nacht” and soon the Nuns started gently singing in French and we joined in English. One or two at a time we made our way to the small niche with the star marking the actual birthplace of Jesus.

To get in the niche, you have to bow your head. And if you wished to see the star, you had to 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.

[Thanks to Walter Brueggemann for his article “Off By Nine Miles” in the *Christian Century*, Dec. 19, 2001.]