

August 26, 2007  
Being A Good Neighbor (Part 1)  
Two Different Paths  
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(Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, {2} asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." {3} When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; {4} and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. {5} They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: {6} 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" {7} Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. {8} Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." {9} When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. {10} When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. {11} On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. {12} And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I want to talk this morning about two very different ways of being on the pathway to God. I think that these help illustrate how we can be "good neighbors" to people who are different from us.

One path is over 2,000 years old — the other happens every day.

The modern path is the pilgrimage of thousands of American Christians to the Biblical lands — particularly the one known in the Bible as Persia — which is of course modern day Iraq.

And why are these Christians traveling to Iraq?

To convert the heathen Muslims!

One denomination has stated that they see the current US occupation of Iraq as a wonderful opportunity to win the souls of countless Iraqi's for Jesus. A former head of this denomination once described the prophet Mohammed as

a “demon-possessed pedophile.”

Franklin Graham, president of the Billy Graham Evangelical Foundation has described Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion.”

Jon Hannah, a missionary from this denomination, when he returned back to the United States from Iraq, in which he claims to have distributed 1.3 million Christian tracts concluded: “The Muslim religion is an antichrist religion.” While they have delivered food and clothing to the Iraqi people — Hannah says that what they need even more is spiritual nourishment.

When the primary purpose of Christianity is seen as converting people to the faith — because we have the truth and their faith is nothing but a lie — it is easy to see how Muslim people see this for exactly what it is — HOLY WAR.

But I think that there is another model.

A model that is given to us in the bible.

Have you ever looked real closely at the story of the Magi or the Wise Men?

We are told that the Magi “observed his star at its rising.”  
What does that mean?

Think about this — we have wise people searching the night skies looking — not for signs that they have the truth — but for signs of truth anywhere is might show itself. They seem to know that the Holy One is not limited in revealing themselves only to their people.

In other words — they have taken their heads out of their holy books long enough to gaze up and see if they can’t experience those things that are the source of our unity — rather than holding fast to those things that divide us.

What fascinates me about these wise guys is that they seemed to understand that regardless of where we live, or what we believe, the TRUTH is we all come from the same place and are made of the same stuff.

We are created by the creator — each of us

Pagan

Jew

Hindu

Muslim

Christian

The story tells us that they are gazing up at the stars, and realize that a very

special person is about to be born — someone who will  
 transcend cultures  
 transcend religious differences  
 and will point us toward a compassionate God — who is the source of all love  
 and is the creator.

The star points them toward the irrelevant country of Israel. So they journey to Bethlehem.

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

I hope you don't fail to see the irony in this story in light of the current political situation in the middle east.

But back then — relationships were different  
 When the Jews were being held in captivity in Babylon, and Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonian Empire; he allowed the Jews to have religious freedom. But more than that, he allowed them to return home, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah remind us that the Persian Kings not only gave the Jews permission to rebuild their Temple, but that they helped pay for it.

It is out of this culture of religious tolerance that the Wise Men come.

And, I think what I love about this story more than anything is WHY they came.

"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

It is not on their agenda to deliver religious tracts to Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. They do not need to convert Jesus to what they believe. Instead, they come to bring Jesus gifts —> of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many different faith groups?

In Northwest Indiana, there seem to be 4 primary religious groups. The percentage of these groups in the United States according to the American religious Identification Survey done in 2001:

- Christians 77% (down from 86% in 1990)
- Jewish 1.3%
- Muslim .5%
- Hindu .4%

Maybe we should also talk about a fifth group which is the fastest growing

group.

- Non-Religious 14 - 20% - depending how you interpret the data

We will address Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, but unfortunately we are skipping how we can be good neighbors to our non-religious neighbors.

One of the first things we must do is understand how we view our neighbors in light of our relationship with God. We need to be clear and honest about what we believe the function and role of Christianity is.

In, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, a book by a number of authors, give some excellent help in understanding how we as Christians often see our neighbors.

One view is what we might call the exclusivist view. This view holds that all who do not accept Jesus Christ as savior and lord will be condemned to hell. For this viewpoint, the whole point of knowing our neighbor is to save them from their wicked ways and bring them into a relationship with Christ.

A second viewpoint holds that God is at work among all people everywhere, even where there is no Christian witness. This we might call an inclusivist view. Jesus is THE definitive revelation of God — Jesus is the complete picture of God. This view would hold that God can be active in the lives of non-Christians, even if they do not realize it. God sees their hearts and judges them accordingly.

John Hick's position in the book is most closely aligned with mine, and that is the pluralistic view. This view believes that, and I don't want to say all, most religions have equally valid paths to Ultimate Reality. People who hold this viewpoint see their neighbors religious journeys equally valid, and so desire to understand one another and learn from one another, because they are not threatened nor do they threaten each others core beliefs.

Knowing which position you hold is critical in how you view your neighbor.

If you believe that Jesus is the only way — then converting your non-Christian friends becomes important otherwise you will be responsible for damning them to hell.

If you believe that Jesus is one way (maybe even the best way) your attitude toward your neighbors of other faith traditions takes on a different tone.

Let's go back to the beginning of our journey this morning.

I offered to you two different paths of being in relationship with our neighbors.

Which do you believe is more honoring of God?

Someone knocking on your door and asking you: Do you know where you are going if you should die tonight?

Or someone coming to pay homage to your beliefs, even if that is not what they believe?

Can you imagine what our relationships with our neighbors might be like if they were homage based, like the Magi?

What would it mean for Christians to make the journey across strange cultural and religious landscapes bearing only gifts of respect for all that is sacred in other religious traditions?

I believe strongly that we as Christians need to honor our sacred tradition and our symbols and our narratives as sacramental — because they have the power to open us up to the wonderful mysteries of God. And if we are steeped in our own faith — then, like the Magi we can make a pilgrimage to learn from our neighbors.

Because we are secure in our faith tradition, we can pay homage to other faith traditions.

I think Bruce Sanguin put it best when he wrote:

I believe that the deeper we go into our own faith system, the closer we get to God, and the closer we get to God, the more we are informed by the values of diversity, inclusivity, and respect for the inherent dignity of other people and faiths.

Our story this morning concludes with this remark:

“they left for their own country by another road.”

The Magi fascinate me. Matthew tells us that they went home by another way. He doesn't tell us that they became the first Christians — we have no reason to believe that they became followers of Jesus at all.

They went home — back to Persia, back to Zoroastrianism. But the

interesting thing is they go home by a different road. I think that Matthew is telling us that this encounter with Jesus, had a transformational effect on them. Not that they became Christians, but that this encounter changed them, and helped them as they continued on their journey toward God.

Two paths — two very different ways of seeing and understanding our neighbors.

If you want to read a great novel about what the first path is like, pick up Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*. It reminds us of the arrogance we sometimes bring with us to the mission field.

When we go to the mission field — when we encounter our neighbors who have different religious beliefs than us — do we go to change them? Or do we get to know them so that we might be transformed by the experience — having found the Christ in the people we serve — regardless of whether they are Muslim, Hindu, Jew or anything else?