

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
January 4, 2015

Homiletical Commentary
Delivered by Suellen Barnett

[Debbie Lundberg reads Matthew 2:1-12]

HOMILETICAL COMMENTARY

Cornel wrote this commentary. It is largely from the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, Cornel's favorite "go to" book for a quick understanding of the Bible.

Jesus's birth is placed in relationship to wider political and social events. Herod the Great was a vassal king under the Roman emperor; he reigned from 37 to 4 BC, an extraordinary and dominant personality.

The Magi are a caste of wise men, variously associated with interpretation of dreams, Zoroastrianism, astrology, and magic. In later Christian tradition, they became kings through a reading of Psalm 72 and Isaiah 49 and 60. Their number settled at three, deduced from the three gifts. Eventually, they were named: Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior in the Western church, and Caspar became a black. They were understood as representatives of the Gentile world in all its racial diversity that comes to Christ. They came from the East, which could be Persia, East Syria, or Arabia.

Jesus is designated a Royal Messiah. The star that leads to Christ is probably a Jewish Midrash element derived from Numbers 22-24, the Balaam narrative. The star is identified with the Messiah. If historical, it could be a supernova, a comet, or a planetary conjunction.

Bethlehem is the town of the humble David in contrast with Herod's Jerusalem. Bethlehem was the city of David's ancestor Ruth and of his immediate family, yet, despite Micah 5:2, there does not seem to have been a dominant belief at this time that the Messiah would be born there.

Herod's sly request of the wise men in verse 8 is classical political duplicity.

Gold, frankincense, myrrh is the list of gifts inspired by Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 where the gifts are implicitly cited. In later tradition, gold came to signify the kingship of Christ, incense his divinity, myrrh his redemptive suffering – or virtue, prayer, and suffering.

Some early Christians were scandalized at this narrative because of the role of the star. Did this feature favor astrology? Ancient people, experiencing social chaos, felt attracted to astral religion because of the cold regularity of the stars. But, this religion became oppressive, making people feel helpless under the tyranny of fate.

Matthew shows no interest in this problem. But because the star here serves God's purpose and leads the Magi to Jesus, we can say that the power of astral determinism is broken. Fate disappears when God's purpose is born in Jesus. Jesus will show a new and purposeful way to live one's life. We are inheritors of that way.

[Debbie reads Matthew 2:13-23]

HOMILETICAL COMMENTARY

A number of mainline magazines carried stories this season of Jesus's birth. Newsweek told the story in the positive light of angels appearing to Mary and shepherds, the birth in a manger, and visits to the baby Jesus by shepherds and wise men. The same positive telling happened in our Christmas Eve service.

The Christmas stories generally avoid the dark side of the story as depicted in the second reading where Jesus's birth invokes the massacre of the innocents.

One can refer to a strict biblical commentary as we did in the first part of this homily or one can speak existentially of the problems of the text as Cornel has primarily chosen to do here.

The primary problem is why God would warn Joseph and Mary about the forthcoming disaster and not warn the parents of the children in and around Bethlehem.

In general, God does not work this way – God is not responsible for hurting and killing people. There is mystery in four people walking on a sidewalk and two of them stopping at a window while the other two walk on and 50 seconds later, a car veers off the road and crashes into the two who walked on. We do not understand this and we dare not say that God told the two to stop at the window while the others walked into serious injury or death.

This makes the story of Joseph and Mary and the massacre of the innocents even more puzzling. The parents of Jesus move to Egypt. The biblical writers make the connection between the Israelites going into and coming out of Egypt in the time of Moses and Jesus going into and coming out of Egypt. Both Moses and Jesus are agents of liberation.

Commentators link God's killing of the first born of Egyptian parents in the Old Testament story and the killing of the innocents in this New Testament account. These stories have to be seen in fable or mythological terms otherwise it gives us an incorrect picture of God.

Jesus survives Herod's mass killing. Those crushed by such horrific events are not annihilated by God but by the demons of the day, Herod in Jesus' day, Hitler in World War 2 and Stalin in later years.

The massacre of the innocent's story relates to the problem of evil in the world and primarily speaks about the fact of evil. Evil and suffering happens and the questions become how we overcome evil and what we do about it and how we respond to suffering.

Christians decry evil and empathize with those who suffer. We can see reasons for evil in our world like greed, jealousy, abusive power, megalomania, and the like, and some of it is a mystery, but our response is always to analyze and overcome the problem and respond with compassion, peace, love and justice. Jesus teaches us how to respond and that becomes the biblical story from here on out. Amen.