

Beyond Our Circles

A sermon preached by Colby Whittaker

January 8, 2012, Binkley Baptist Church

Lectionary texts used: Ephesians 3 : 1-12; Matthew 2: 1-12

So, if you are like most of us, you've probably taken down (or at least thought hard about taking down) your Christmas decorations by now. The lights, the trees, the decorations, they've all returned to a tub, crate or box somewhere in an attic or basement where they will gather dust for another year. We love Christmas. But once the day is past, the gifts are unwrapped and the kids are about ready to head back to school we start to think of those decorations less as a joy and more as another burdensome thing we have to get out of the way. Believe me, I get this. On a normal year my house has between 7 and 10 Christmas trees. From the two full height and fully lit monstrosities down to the variety of miniature and table size trees that come in themes from Charlie Brown to dogs to Mickey Mouse. It is a multi day endeavor to pack all of those pieces away.

But if we're not careful there's something we can miss in our post-holiday rush. The Christmas season doesn't end on the 25th. It begins. And at the end of these twelve days of the Christmas season we bump up against a beautiful time in the Christian calendar. Now, as a Divinity student you start to get really nitpicky about holiday things. One of the things that drives me a bit crazier every year has to do with nativity scenes. Now, most people are on the ball enough to know that if you're really concerned about such things the baby Jesus isn't added to the nativity scene until Christmas.

But what a lot of people miss is those three strange bearded figures who always seem to wind up on the periphery of any nativity. You see, the wise men never actually made it to the manger. For that reason they don't actually go into the nativity scene. Not when its first laid out, not even at Christmas. Its not until the entire Christmas season, all twelve days have passed that the Wise Men show up on the scene. And that brings us to today.

Today we celebrate one of the lesser known holidays of the Christian calendar, the first Sunday after Epiphany. It is the day we commemorate both God's incarnation in Christ and also the worship and recognition of Jesus by the figures of the magi. To be honest its a bit of a strange holiday. Its meaning has a tendency to wander. For some denominations it extends to Christ's baptism, for other's the wedding at Cana. Some focus in solely on the Incarnation, extending the themes of the Christmas celebration even further. But again and again we return to the figures of the wise men.

Now, sometimes we get a bit confused as to who exactly these wise men were. Sometimes they're called kings and other times magi. Looking at the time frame and the description the Gospel gives us, our best guess is that they were some kind of astrologers, probably political advisers to a royal court somewhere around Babylon (where astrology and Zoroastrianism were a big deal). To get their court role in mind think 1 part fortune teller, 1 part chaplain and 2 parts political strategists.

Now, this political bit is important. We'll come back to that. So we pick up this tale in the 2nd chapter of Matthew. The wise men "observed his star rising" and "came to pay him homage." This is not the most solid game plan I've ever heard. I've taken spontaneous road trips with my roommates with more planning than this. Here's where the politics come back for us. Our intrepid heroes only have the vaguest idea of where they're going. But they're looking for God's movement in the world. And they serve in the courts of kings. Where the levers of history are pulled and its rudder set. God must be moving there. They were, of course, political men.

So catch this, we only have 12 verses about these fellas. 2/3 of those, 8 in total, are about them. completely missing the point. They saw the way they fit into the world and assumed that God could only work in this way. There was a place where God could be, the courts and palaces of the kings, and a place where God could not be, amongst the poor, the common and the forlorn. Why should God be found amongst carpenters, shepherds and farmers? So they set out for the fancy palace. They sought out God amongst the trappings of their

own way of life and found one of the most disturbing and profane rulers of their day. It was only when they turned their eyes beyond their own sphere that they could find the child-king.

Its a lot easier to see God at work when that work is through the things we love. Its so hard to see God at work in the things that are unfamiliar to us. Harder still to see God at work in the things we actually dislike, even despise. And yet God has a disturbing tendency to choose these very things again and again.

When we hear the story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus we often focus on the person of Paul himself. For good reason. We talk about Paul and Jesus on the road and the conversion and mission which followed. But its easy to miss a few things in this story.

First, Ananias, a Christian disciple living in Damascus. This is all we really get about him. But that's all we really need. Jesus himself appears to him, tells him to go and find this man named Saul, to pray for him and take him in. Ananias isn't dumb. He knows who Saul is. How would you respond if you received a revelation that there was a blind and wounded terrorist waiting for you at the Starbucks down town and God has chosen him for a special task? And that you yourself have to go to him?

Look at how Ananias responds here: 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' Not only does Saul have authority to kidnap, terrorize and torture but he's shown an earnest eagerness to pursue it on Ananias' friends and family.

But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Ananias stomachs what most of us couldn't imagine. But because of that he is, quite literally, the very hands with which God welcomes the apostle Paul into the community of the Church. Can we imagine that kind of vision? That sort of faith? This is the essence of the epiphany. Acknowledging God's movements in the most unlikely of places. God is not bound by our inclinations, habits, social circles or imagination. Out there, at this very moment, God is starting something new. Something beyond our horizons.

This is a warning we cannot escape. Wherever we stand God is calling us to look beyond our horizons, beyond our own circles. God is moving in the world. And he's moving in the places we least want to seek Him and the places we least want to be found. The bar has been set, God turns the most despicable of enemies into apostles, the least likely of individuals into prophets. God brings salvation into the world in a barn and turns a fanatical religious terrorist into a missionary of peace and forgiveness. The political party that pushes your buttons? The annoying kid in your math class? Rich or poor, strong or weak, regardless of race, nationality or creed God is setting things in motion. There is no room for self-contentment within this command.