

“Born to Raise Us from the Earth”

A Sermon Series for Saint Mark's, Evanston by
The Rev'd John A. Dally

Sunday, January 6

“I Had Seen Birth and Death, but Thought They Were Different”

I am inviting us to think together during these weeks of the Christmas/Epiphany season about issues of identity, purpose and vocation. Last week we began by considering the matter of identity. I pointed out that there are a variety of identities for Jesus in gospels exemplified by the various birth narratives or lack thereof. Mark's Jesus is a mystery, with no story of his origins. Matthew and Luke each have stories about Jesus' conception and birth, but they have almost nothing in common. John's gospel is the clearest about who Jesus is and where he comes from, and that gospel's prologue was our focus last week. According to John, Jesus is the one who lives next to the Father's heart, and the gospel writer invites us to claim that identity for ourselves as individuals and as communities.

Appealing, isn't it? To believe that we each live next to God's beating heart, like an infant on its mother's breast? And to be sure of that identity day in and day out, no matter what comes our way? It's especially attractive to us if we had a flawed or failed relationship with our own parents, who may not have loved us, or loved us enough, or loved us in the way we needed. But knowing who we are in the sight of God — as Jesus did — is far more than accessing a warm feeling. I suggested last week that when we know who we truly are we also realize what we are in the world to do — what our purpose is. And claiming an identity can cause controversy when that purpose contradicts the status quo. Think of Malcolm X after he made the Hajj, Martin Luther King, Jr. after his “I Have a Dream Speech” in Washington D.C., Bobby Kennedy's choice to run for president, Nelson Mandela's decision to accept the leadership of the African National Congress, and, only last week, the consequences of Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan. We call these people “political figures” but what does that actually mean in these cases but claiming an identity and the purpose that goes along with it?

In today's gospel we see Jesus' identity and purpose causing quite an uproar. We tend to miss the key phrase in Matthew's narrative of the arrival of the magi, not because we need to know Greek, as we did last week, but because we need some historical background not supplied by the gospel text. Herod the Great was not a full Jew but an Edomite, or Idumaeon as they were known by the New Testament period, supposed to be the descendants of Jacob's twin, Esau. Through political ambition and artful collaboration with the Roman occupiers of the Middle East Herod was awarded the title “King of the Jews” by the Roman senate, and his claim to the throne was enforced by Rome's legions. In an attempt to endear himself to his people Herod undertook the expansion and beautification of the Second Temple, but the people of Israel continued to continue him a usurper and traitor. With this background we can now understand why the magi's question, “Where is the child who has been *born* king of the Jews? When Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” By “all Jerusalem” the gospel writer no doubt intends the network of corrupt officials Herod had installed to shore up his weak popular support.

The magi, of course, are not Jews, but gentiles from Persia — Iran — so their question is perhaps an innocent one. They are students of all the world's religions and find in the faith of Israel the seed of a universal belief. They understand that the child “born king of the Jews” is a

long-awaited answer to the troubling questions of Israel's history, but they also see something more in him. Their arrival in Jerusalem both honors Israel's history and breaks it open into new arenas, suggest new interpretations, invites this ancient community to see itself interacting with the world in previously unimagined ways.

There are many signs of the significant history of St. Mark's parish all around your buildings, and I am struck by how many of you seem to know and take pride in that history. St. Mark's, the mother church of the North Shore, its historic building now beautifully restored. But are you merely the sum of your ancestors' history? What is your own chapter to write? What identity and purpose can you claim for yourselves?

One of the danger of interim periods for any parish community is that the forces of status quo assert themselves powerfully. Many voices may express some version of the sentiment "Let's just get past this. It's uncomfortable being without a rector." My best advice to you is this: don't try to get past it. Live into the moment. Discover your identity and purpose apart from a rector, and apart from you ancestors of blessed memory as well. Like the magi, you can honor history and still take it in new directions.

Do have any idea how many parish profiles end up sounding alike? That's because of those same forces of status quo looking for the least disruptive path through the hiring process combined with the fact that during a search both parishes and clergy candidates revert to junior high gym class and the fear of not being picked for the team. The desire to be liked, to be chosen, can lead us into less-than-honest places where we fear to be straightforward about who we really are and what we most truly long for. Yet it's been my experience that it's the strongest profiles, the ones willing to be quirky, or bold, or expressing a big vision, that attract the strongest clergy leaders, individuals who are clear about their identity and purpose and looking to partner with an equally clear community. Nowhere more than here does the adage "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" apply.

Think of the magi as a search committee (and no, not because they're looking for a messiah!). They reverence Israel's history, but in the toddler Jesus they recognize the next chapter in that history, and it's a major expansion of the vision. But grasping that vision and living into it can be costly. T. S. Eliot captured that truth in his famous poem, "The Journey of the Magi." When we truly recognize our identity and purpose we may have to die to the way we'd thought of ourselves up till that moment.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.¹

¹ From *T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber, 1974)

In Eliot's conception the magi see something true about themselves and about the child for whom they bring gifts: gold, because they see leadership in him; frankincense, because they see God in him; myrrh, because they sense that his eventual death has implications for their own deaths. Sometimes we need an outsider's perspective to discern our true vocation. Gifts that show us who we are, and what we are capable of. As various folk come in and out of this community in the coming weeks and months to assist you during your interim time, I pray that they will offer you the gifts the magi offered the Christ Child: gifts that name your potential for leadership, that celebrate your unique quality of holiness, that help you see what can die and what can be born as you prepare to break open your history into a new chapter. May this community be the recipient of many such powerful, difficult gifts in the coming months.
