

Sermon Text for December 10, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 42:6-9, Matthew 2:1-12

"A heart for the world"

I'll never forget, it was probably over 15 years ago that I received a phone call from a member of our church and he said: You have to do something about this. I asked what the problem was and he said: there is a conspiracy in in the town against Christmas, they just put up the holiday banners and they all say Happy Holidays. Christmas is being hijacked by people who don't want Christ mentioned. He was frantic and quite serious. I called people in the city and found out that they hadn't replaced those banners in years and that year nothing had been changed from the previous years in recent memory. There was nothing new that year, but he felt threatened.

This year I see this theme continuing, and people think it is a new theme. There is a sense of indignancy on the part of certain sectors of the Christian community over their God given right to place Christmas and Christ in our culture. Again this year, as has been the case for decades now, some Christians have called for boycotts of stores that do not mention Christmas, remember the Starbucks cup last year and all the drama around that? Even our President has gotten involved in this culture war and has really made it an even more visible battle-ground. Christmas has gotten out of control in so many other ways as well, more than just the naming of it. We've allowed it to be overcome by commercialism and said nothing about it, we've allowed the meaning of Christmas to be taken out of it and said nothing, but now when you want to change the name of it, now people seem to notice.

I don't see anyone upset that people are robbed Jesus of his status as an illegal immigrant. I don't see anyone upset that some Christians have robbed Jesus of being the poorest of the poor without the ability to speak for himself. I don't see anyone angry that we aren't highlighting Jesus' stance against corrupt leaders within the church, especially those who had power. We are all pretty upset, though, that we can't say Christmas. I don't know about you, but it hasn't really affected me. I've said Merry Christmas this year just like in past years. I think it is a much ado about nothing.

As far as I know we are the only nation in the world having this debate. Felis navidad, Joeyex Noel, Buon Natale, dobri dien rashdenya, has never been an issue of contention. Then

why in one of the most Christian nations on the face of the earth is it an issue? Because Christmas hasn't belonged to us for decades and only now are people upset because their comfort level is being affected. It would be so easy for me to preach on the persecution of Christians in this country and the hijacking of Christmas by our culture because many of you believe it and feel strongly about it. I would be preaching, for the most part, to the choir.

But I won't because I don't believe it. Our outrage should not come from the changing of the word Christmas to Holiday because it has been decades now that the Christmas story is no longer the Christian story. Last week we heard the Christmas story which had very little to do with a manager, angels, shepherds, or even wise men that we hear about today. Last weeks' Christmas story was about God's heart for our salvation found in God becoming flesh, pitching a tent and residing in our hearts.

But that sells almost as well as Advent hymns during Advent. So today we look at one of the Christmas stories that has lost their Christian monopoly and try to reclaim it for ourselves as Christians. I am far less worried about making the world recognize Christmas as I am about helping Christians understand Christ who came and lived among us. Today the story of the wise men shows us that God has a heart for the world and our greatest obstacle at times is our own selves.

READ SCRIPTURE

Today we hear about Christmas according to Matthew. We are going to try to deconstruct or demythologize the added emphasis that culture has added to make Christmas more quaint and marketable and try to truly understand what really took place in the story of the wise men.

We begin with the wise men themselves. This term in Greek is literally magoi, which means to us magicians. You can hear about them in Acts 13:6,8 when we read about a certain magician or false prophet who is confronted by the disciples. Also in I Kings 4:30 we hear that Solomon's wisdom surpassed even that of all the wise men from the east. So you would have a cross between David Copperfield and the Dalai Lama. But first and foremost and for the purpose of this account they were foreigners with power and influence and well respected by the rest of the world. That is who they represent in this world. Outsiders but well respected outsiders.

How many of us know immigrants who have recently come into this country? A vast majority of them are professionals, people with engineering degrees, or nurses, or medical

doctors, and when they come to this country their only option, for many of them, is to work at Wal-Mart or some other occupation that does not require the schooling that they have achieved. These kings were at least better recognized in their day than those who today come to our country and can really contribute in their field, but aren't allowed to.

We read that these foreigners who relied upon fate and chance had come following a star in order to pay homage, bend the knee, or worship Jesus . Very strange. They came looking for the king of the Jews so that they might worship him. They get to Jerusalem which was the religious capital of that region expecting to find answers to their basically religious questions about the birth of a new born king. They ask the current King, Herod, for some answers. Herod, who by the way, was a Roman ruler, not Jewish, who resided in Jerusalem, as did Pontius Pilate. Jerusalem who has seen rulers over the years and who is not promised to any people or any nation in eternity in Scripture.

Herod knows nothing, gathers his counselors, puts them on their way with a reminder to come back because he wanted to worship this new king once they found him. These foreigners know more about God's plans and purposes than those who were supposed to be in the know and God's people. In fact Herod was more of a threat as we find out later than those who had traveled from the east. These foreigners weren't a threat to Jesus, Herod, the Roman Ruler was the bigger threat.

These magi knew the purpose of their trip, their journey. What they could never have guessed were the purposes that God had for them in the unfolding of this Christmas story.

The star leads them to where Jesus is and then stops and they rejoice exceedingly in having found their purpose of their journey. Here is where the deconstruction really begins. They are in the house, not the manger, they see the young child, not the baby. In the Greek the word for child not of adolescent age is paidon, the same word used for the boy who brought the fish and loaves for the feeding of the five thousand. It is not the word brepho which means baby, like when the shepherds visit in Luke, or which means fetus when describing the baby in Elizabeth's womb when it leapt for joy.

The magi came at a later time than when we are used to seeing and than we see culture depicting for us. There is a reason for culture folding all the characters in the gospel together, it sells much better to have the wise men visit a cute, helpless baby in a manger with the shepherds and the contrast of the classes coming together to worship. Instead of a visiting a pimply pre-adolescent child who was at the side of his mother. It is then, and I argue when he would

remember that visit and spark in him the understanding that he was, as he had always suspected and been told by his mother, different from all the other kids, it was then that they came and worshipped him, when they came to bend the knee. They bring these costly gifts to him which would easily cover his college tuition. These gifts which tell these strangers as they worship him that God has a place in his heart for all of us.

The wise men having completed this journey from afar and as complete outsiders geographically, religiously, as magicians, and in so many different ways, show us that God's love expands beyond those we normally think it should reach to. Christmas was never ours. It belonged to Jesus, God made human. It belonged to Mary, this teenage mom just recently married. To Joseph a righteous father unsure of the future. To the shepherds who were shunned by the church because of their uncleanness but accepted by culture because of the important role they played. These shepherds who probably were stateless gypsies who climbed over many walls to get to the greener pastures. To the wise men who were rejected by the people of God because of their sorcery and yet accepted and respected by the world because of their wisdom.

It is the magi, not the people of faith, who truly worship Jesus, truly worship him, while Herod who really represents the structured, institutional church, and current power structure, who rejects him and has ulterior motives for wanting to keep control of what happened on Christmas. I think this scene comes pretty close to where we are now wrapped up in how we look on the outside this holiday season, while our worship, our true worship of the Christ is lacking.

After all what is true worship? Is true worship making people say Merry Christmas. Is true worship saying Merry Christmas and when we do say it in public feeling a sense of victory, a false victory at that? I think Micah 6:6-8 describes for us what is true worship, what the Lord requires from us.

God has, we see in the wise men, a heart for the world. Isaiah speaks about God using us to reach out to the nations, those who do not know God. What message are we sending unbelievers as we try to protect at all costs that which we consider our rights and our territory as Herod did in his own kingdom. Herod did the same exact thing. What motivated him was not God's heart for the world but his understanding of being first in God's eyes. He felt his power slipping and wanted to keep it all costs. The most important thing for him was what he wanted. Instead of worshipping our Savior as we ought to in a way that might change and impact us we try to dictate to people what they have to think about him so they will think like us and agree

with us.

Are we, as Isaiah states, a light to the nations or to the people, or are we the laughingstock and defined by our battles over trivial and inconsequential issues? Satan absolutely loves this dialogue that is taking place in our nation this year. The more time we spend boycotting stores for the terms they use to describe the season, the less time we spend talking about the revelation of Christ to the world as a light to the world. We are spreading more darkness rather than light as we take part in these actions. Isaiah tells us the birth of Christ has everything to do with opening the eyes of the blind, bringing prisoners from the dungeon. Bringing light to a dark world.

God has a heart for the world that at this time of the year we see to continue to distance themselves from us. At First Presbyterian we have tried to focus on God's call upon our hearts to reach out to the world and not just try to protect our own and be in a self-serving mode. We have asked all of us to have happy feet as we reach out to others to come and know Christ personally and be a part of a community that actually focuses on substantial issues. How have you done? Can you look out in this congregation and identify a person that you have introduced to Christ through First Presbyterian Church and now is worshipping with you? Have you experienced the joy of the star stopping and knowing that your journey is complete? Or have you spent most of your time arguing with culture about Christmas and other non-issues which Satan uses to distract you from reaching the world one on one with the love of Christ.

Finally, stewardship season is over and as the wise men laid down precious gifts before Christ recognizing his Lordship and his impact he would have on the world, so we have laid gifts, some of us with more faith than last year in God's providence, so we have come today aware of God's love for the world and wanting to be a part of that journey and that story here at the end we can truly worship the Christ not for our own self-interest or economic gain, but because we truly love him and his heart for the world. Amen.