

Promises Foretold – Christmas 2C

Our family has strong connections in Cincinnati, Ohio, so stops have been frequent over the years in the busy airport there, which actually sits across the Ohio River in the state of Kentucky. Just eleven miles down the road from the airport, one can have the bizarre experience of visiting the Creation Museum, where geology, archaeology, paleontology, anthropology and many of other fields of scientific inquiry are derisively dismissed in favor of Biblical literalism. Countless scientific developments provide the means to operate this state-of-the-museum-arts complex, with its steel and glass structures, special effects-rich film presentations, fast-food cafeterias and opulent gift shops, but the obvious paradox is never explained to curious visitors. You just have to agree to not think about that part of it and go with the flow. All science works, except what we disbelieve.

This time of year, when we read of the Magi visiting Jesus, it's not easy to cast stones at the Creationists. As many have pointed out, the star they follow behaves as no star ever did or could. Not only did it move through the sky over a period of time, but they could tell what house the star was over. As James Adams points out, "If anybody in New England looked up and saw a star, they wouldn't be able to tell if it was over New York City or Cambridge, Massachusetts. If any star came close enough to distinguish such a precise location, the whole eastern seaboard would be incinerated along with the rest of the world." Even before there was such thing as astronomy, everyone knew that stars do not behave the way this one in Matthew's gospel does, so our joy and understanding must come, not from insisting that there must have been dinosaurs on Noah's Ark (juvenile ones, of course), but from allowing the story of the Magi to resonate in us as permanently and

powerfully as it did in those who first told it.

It helps to know that the ancients knew the stars as living beings – with personalities and intentions. It wasn't until the Second Council of Constantinople in 533, that church leaders decided the stars themselves did not reason and have souls. We don't have to know the Magi were following a comet or a celestial phenomenon that contains scientific congruence with the fossil record, any more than we need to know how the Breath of God is in the consciousness of humankind. Those intrepid spiritual adventurers spent their lives gazing upon the heavens. They sought clues as to the nature of God's intention for them, and found answers in whatever it was they saw. The answers were: "Mount up, ride on, bring gifts." And so they did. Was it a star with a personality? Was it an angel of the Lord? What difference does it possibly make?

At the very least, this story served to validate the presence and the message of Jesus the Christ well and permanently beyond the confines of the Jews of Galilee to whom it was first conveyed. King Herod, who really was a King of the Jews, is said to have done everything in his power to destroy the possibility of God incarnate in Bethlehem. But these curious foreign strangers could see, even across the desert sands, how Jesus birth would carry promise for all of humankind.

Promise, yes, but not untold promise. Aristotle the Greek philosopher is, of course famous for his mastery of rhetoric: "Tell them what you're going to tell them, then tell them what you want to tell them, then tell them what you told them," is the modern English boil-down of his approach to effective public speaking. And our Biblical canon is nothing if not good rhetoric. Today's readings give us a neat and powerful of example of how it works.

Jeremiah tells us what the Lord is going to do: “They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and be radiant over the grain, the wine, and the oil; their life shall become like a watered garden and they shall never languish again.” Not only that, but, “Sing aloud with gladness for I am going to gather you from the farthest parts of the earth. I will let you walk by brooks of water, in a straight path on which you shall not stumble.” That’s what the Lord has planned. The Gospel itself says what the Lord is doing: “Here is the child who has been born king of the Jews;” declare the Magi, “we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” And the followers of Jesus can never stop telling what it is that has been done: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who chose us before the foundation of the world. He has made known to us the mystery of his will, a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in heaven and on earth, so that we, might live for the praise of his glory.” Amen.

There is a fourth step, one which Aristotle leaves out, but Jesus does not, nor does Matthew, nor must we: “In him you also, when you hear the word of truth and believe in him, are marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit... Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Unlike the rhetoricians, even those as great as Aristotle, our stories are not meant to convince, so much as to convey. If we have been met by the living Christ, and consider ourselves blessed thereby, blessed enough to possess hope, we will know ourselves to be obliged, even compelled to protect and nurture that gift of hope by passing it along, sharing it abroad, giving it

away. We now know the future has already happened in Christ, and the past is yet to come, when all will again be God's perfection. Meanwhile, whatever else we may do with ourselves, our only truly necessary occupation is to describe, portray and embody that certainty for others.

Archaeologists recently unearthed a temple in a long-abandoned town in Galilee, where Jesus appears to have lived, Magdala. In the center of the worship space is a small-scale replica of the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Those pesky scientists again, have speculated that this replica, unusually depicted with images of the Great Temple far away from that spot, might represent an early venture into the theology that says God is with us wherever we may go, not just back at headquarters. The implication is that the Magi came to Bethlehem, and once they left and went their way homeward by another road, the glory of the Christ went with them in their hearts. But sometimes those, like Herod, who are running headquarters, are horribly bereft of grace.

The further implication is that what took place in the Magi can take place in each of us. When the psalmist rhapsodizes, "How lovely is thy dwelling place to me O God of hosts..." that dwelling place is whatever and wherever every created thing needs it to be. It is no longer just for one chosen, literal-minded people in one chosen place, way and time. How hard this has been for us to accept. We can indeed and forever sing the Lord's song in a strange land, because it is in our hearts that the roads to Zion are forever built, and God will make all our valleys places of springs.