

“An Anti-Imperial Church”

Matthew 2.1–12

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 4 January 2009

It’s sometimes hard to know what to put on the sign in front of Plymouth that will catch the eye of people who are members of the “church alumni association,” or who have never stepped in a church before. “Services at 9 and 11” doesn’t exactly leave viewers buzzing with enthusiasm as they drive by. Phrases like “All Are Welcome” have been made meaningless by churches where that phrase should be followed by an asterisk: “All Are Welcome * ... so long as you are our age, respectable, don’t ask too many questions, straight, and conform to all of the middle-class norms we hold dear.” Of course, all of that won’t fit on a church sign, which must be the reason that churches don’t put all of that up there. :)

We tend to attract a fair number of academics, and since we border CSU, so I asked Marcus Borg what slogan on a church sign would get him to drop in on a Sunday, and his response was “An Anti-Imperial Church.” (Unfortunately, I’d already posted “Progressively Protestant” last Monday, before I can up with the sermon title, so “An Anti-Imperial Church” will have to wait for another day on Prospect Road).

So, what does all of this have to do with the Epiphany of these magi whom Matthew describes? First, let’s clear up the king business. The Greek word *magoi* means sorcerers or astrologers or interpreter of dreams. The text doesn’t say *king* at all. But if you’re trying to emphasize the importance of Jesus, and these magi are bringing expensive gifts, then perhaps you can assume they were royalty. *That’s a stretch*. And it actually takes the zest out of the story to say they were kings. The text says *magoi*. (In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, we meet Simon *Magus*, Simon the Magician, who is not a good guy, but something of a charlatan.) So, magi aren’t necessarily good guys either, at least on the face of it.

We don’t know how many magi there were, but often we associate three magi with three gifts that the gospel story mentions. And later tradition assigns them the names Caspar, Belthasar, and Melchior. The magi were Gentiles...non-believers...ritually unclean.... They were as far from the religious authorities of the day as possible. And God knows they weren’t Romans. (They did, however, smell the duplicity of Rome’s puppet, Herod, when they visited him.)

They knew the stench of empire and rejected it, opting instead for a child to lead them. It is one of those unlikely turns that reinforces the idea that Jesus, even as an infant, embodies a reign that stands in stark contrast to the forces of empire in his day.



I started thinking about that part of the story and whether it might contain a few archetypes that we hear echoed in other stories: outsiders understanding the power of a child or youth who stands in opposition to empire. And a book that my son Christopher and I are reading came to mind.

In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Hagrid, the failed wizard (or magus!) and gamekeeper of Hogwarts, is an unlikely hero. A kind-hearted half-giant, he is entrusted by the great wizard Albus Dumbledore to keep the infant Harry safe from the evil Lord Voldemort, who tries to kill Harry after murdering his parents. (Sounds a little like Herod and the slaughter of the innocents, doesn’t it?) Dumbledore sends the infant Harry to live with the boy’s aunt and uncle, who treat him shabbily and deny any kind of power the young boy starts to show.

Hagrid, whom other wizards may look down upon since he was expelled from Hogwarts as a youth, understands the importance of the boy to the wizarding world and the way that Harry embodies the force of goodness against the Dark Lord. The evil forces of Voldemort, the death-eaters, try to control the unseen world of wizards, but the young Harry is a potent force that prevents this, even though he doesn't even know at first that he is a wizard.

So, perhaps we can see the magi not as kings, but as characters like Hagrid, **unlikely heroes who understand what others do not about a certain powerful child.**

The other story that came to mind involves people living in a desert wilderness (which itself sounds slightly biblical), but the desert is on a planet called Tatooine in the *Star Wars* saga. As an infant, Luke Skywalker is sent to live with *his* aunt and uncle on a moisture farm. And like the early desert fathers and mothers who formed the Christian monastic tradition in the Egyptian desert in the early centuries of the faith, Obi-wan Kenobi lives the life of a hermit in the desert. (The adjective cenobitic means monastic, and I can't help thinking George Lucas didn't have that in mind when naming Kenobi.) People think that the old man who lives alone out in the desert is very strange and perhaps not quite sane. No one seems to know much about Obi-wan's background, but it turns out that he is a Jedi – one who has studied the ways of The Force and is able to harness it in powerful ways. Sometimes, it may seem that Obi-wan is something like the magi, as one who has an alternative source of wisdom and ability. And unlike everyone else on Tatooine, Obi-wan alone knows that young Luke to become a Jedi and to trust The Force, and that together they will fight against the dark forces of the Empire. (Whenever the Jedi say, "May the Force be with you," I always want to respond, "And also with you.")



The forces of empire are not just bound up in *Star Wars*, and they didn't die out in 410 AD when Rome was sacked. Empire still exists. It exists wherever a nation or a people attempt to aggrandize their territorial or economic possessions at the expense of another nation or people. When we set up systems that oppress or control one group of people to enrich another, that's a characteristic of empire, whether it was the British in India, the French in Indochina, or the Portuguese in Africa. And it takes on different forms today that may not seem so obvious – the Chinese in Tibet or the Sudan or the United States in Iraq.

The contrast between God's intention for the world and Caesar's intention for the world is clear: God's intention for us is shalom, and Caesar's intention is domination.

Dominic Crossan sets up two contrasting paradigms for Christ's and Caesar's way toward peace. The imperial path involves four steps: religion then war then victory then peace. Christ's path involves religion then nonviolence then justice then peace. Which peace do you think will endure longer: conquest or justice?

You may be saying to yourself, "Well, Hal, that's all well and good, but how does this get put into practice?" There are many answers to that question, but one aspect is contained in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. (As announced, our Justice and Peace Ministry is cosponsoring a series of short films on each goal at Plymouth and neighboring communities of faith.): end poverty and hunger, universal education, gender equality, child health, maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, environmental sustainability, and global partnership for development. Again, that's one possible direction.

I'm going to leave you with a few questions to ask yourselves this week as we remember the magi:

- Who are the Caesars and Herods of our day?
- And how can we be the unlikely heroes who support the reign that Christ came to announce?
- How can we be an anti-imperial church, moving ourselves further into being a Christ-led world?

The magi can be seen as the figures we learned about in childhood: kings who brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Or they can be seen as people who weren't the ones we expected to understand the miracle that was unfolding before them: the birth of a special child, who was to bring an alternative path toward God's shalom. Their pilgrimage was long and costly; ours is as well. May God bless us on our journey together as we enter this new year.

Amen.