

November 30, 2014 “The 1st Miracle” Matthew 2:1-6

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, this season whose perimeter is set by the 4 Sundays that lead up to the week in which Christmas Eve and Day occur. It is the season of preparation. There was a time when this was the season for Christmas shopping, getting the Christmas tree, when that was harvested from the forest. Doing the baking that would become the source of treats in the holiday season. Decorating the home for the celebration. And while patterns have changed as the pace of life has in general changed, everyone understands, the heat is now on. The deadline for getting ready is in view. Christmas is 25 days away. As they say in sports and politics... “we are on the clock!”

The theme of the services in Advent this year involves miracles, four of them. The order in most cases will be obvious, it is the order in which they appear in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, which are our primary sources regarding the birth of Jesus. The first one takes a bit of explaining. But before I get to that point, definitions are necessary. What is a miracle? In the church we say rather glibly, “an act of God.” As you know in the Insurance business an act of God excuses the companies involved from liability. So I will begin here by turning to the Oxford Dictionary. According to the dictionary a miracle is a wonder. Something that excites awe.

Endeavoring to be more specific, without actually naming God, the dictionary goes on to suggest, “a miracle is a marvelous event due to some supposed supernatural agency”. That is how you implicate God without taking a position that God is real, or really involved. As a student at Seminary the professor asked, who will offer a definition of the word miracle? No one volunteered. So he named a volunteer. Mitchell, what is a miracle? I blushed at being put on the spot. And then I offered... “a miracle is an event that creates faith.” The professor was pleased...initially. That's pretty good he said. Where did you get that from? I was aware I was cornered. George Bernard Shaw, I replied. In his play St. Joan. As the professor well knew George Bernard Shaw was a critic of the Church, the Christian faith and all things that “smacked” of some supposed supernatural agency. After several minutes of consideration he allowed the definition was sound, although he was extremely uncomfortable about the source. I tried to help. “It is the bishop who offers the definition,” I said. “The one who condemns her to be burned at the stake?” he asked. I said, yes as quietly as I could. At this end of half a century of ministry it is still the best and most Biblical definition of a miracle I have run across. An event that creates faith. An event that changes lives because faith is a powerful force, drawing its power not from us but from God, the living God. God who is as real as we are!

Which brings us to the first miracle. I warned you there would be something arbitrary in naming it the first. Follow my logic. It did not occur in Bethlehem, nor Nazareth. It is not the angel's appearance to Mary, nor the angel's appearance to Joseph to convince him to become the husband of Mary and thereby the earthly father to God's only begotten Son. No...the first miracle is a star. A star that appears in the night sky. A star that is noticed by Magi priests who study the sky and the stars in their search for understanding of what is happening in the lives of men and women, and for understanding of what is going to happen, to shape lives and history.

They did not have our modern technology at their disposal. They did not have

telescopes. If the legends are reliable, they probably were not even working together or in the same place.

What they did have were charts. Charts of the stars and the movements of the stars, and the planets, and comets, describing when they appeared and how they appeared. They knew the patterns of the night sky better than sailors did. They were experts. Their knowledge and their tools based on painstaking hand made records to which they added with each passing season. Because to spot the new and the novel, the wondrous and even marvelous, one must first of all know exactly what it is that is routine about the sky and its appearance.

Working in their different places of abode. They spotted it in the sky. A new star. If that term bothers us as 21st century people...a new point of light among all the regular points of light that belong in the night sky. They saw it. They tracked its appearance. And separately they concluded that it was of great significance, for it was bright, and sudden in its appearance. The only question it promoted for each of them was what does it mean. What is happening? What does it portend?

According to the legends, they got together. That involved some significant travel. A season or more. They held a council, a meeting of minds, sharing their experience...each one had seen its initial appearance. Same time, roughly same place in the sky. Bright. Clear. Obviously..... meaningful. They were scholars. They had access to documents. Ancient manuscripts. Scrolls. Libraries. And they were impressed by this ancient Hebrew document. Probably Numbers 24:17.. “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel”. And as they talked they came to believe they understood. A ruler would arise out of this insignificant, highly religious people, the Jews, a ruler who would change the world. There were other texts... “a child who would save this people Israel, and the gentiles as well.”

Why call this the first miracle? We know they journeyed for close to two years in search of the infant Jesus. We know that when they found Him, they found him not in a stable but in a house in Bethlehem. Ironically they got help from Herod on the final pieces of the puzzle. Well, not so much Herod, as Herod's Jewish connections...the chief priests and teachers of the law whom he called to meet not only with his political counselors but with these Magi priests who arrived with such an impressive caravan in search for the king who was born in Judea.

Why call it a miracle? Well there is this heavenly sign. This insistence of the documents of the New Testament, of the sources on which Luke and Matthew relied, that it started with a star in the night sky. To be sure, and this is so important to Presbyterian Christians....a star interpreted by Scripture to be an important sign. A significant occurrence. And then, there is the ingredient of the Magi themselves. They were not Jews. They were Gentiles. They belonged not to Israel, or Judea but to the rest of the world. And yet somehow they have unlocked a secret about the future and about the current times that the high priests and teachers of the law have not discovered, until it is pointed out to them as an occurrence of significance.

And of course that too is a scripturally sound insight. He comes to his own, this king who is born, and his own do not receive him, do not recognize him, come very close, to not even noticing his coming. And yet what else can you call it? These Gentiles in their

magnificent robes, with their magnificent entourage, have invested whatever it took in financial terms to mount this expedition to Judea, to Jerusalem to find and see and worship. Did they say worship? Yes they did, they said, "We saw his star in the East, and have come to worship him...the one who is born king of the Jews!"

Herod who was by his human nature a disturbed individual...became very disturbed, and the word went through Jerusalem and the city was disturbed by the knowledge that apparently within easy reach of their city and their traditions, their way of life, one had been born who was rightfully their king! What else could you call the motivation of these non-believing, gentile, foreign, astrologers...if not faith. They have paid for the expedition. They have "suffered" the rigors and challenges of the journey. Because they believe they will find the one who is born to save his people, and touch the souls of the world in time to come. They have come to recognize his kingship. To bow before his divine nature. They will present he and his family with significant gifts....treasures. Because they believe they understood, understand, something they have seen in the midnight sky, something new, something that does not fit the patterns of the past. Something that means the world will be changed in the the future. Something they saw back in their own desert like abode. In the far east. In one case if legend is to be trusted in Africa. Here they are several years later in Jerusalem. And then sent by Herod to Bethlehem where it all comes together, and they bow before the child who is Jesus.

You see, something has happened to these astrologers, these Magi. A bond between them and us...yes them and us. They have paid attention to obscure Bible verses. And they have seen the will of God revealed. And they have found themselves compelled to act. They have found they have to invest in this Kingdom of God. Before it is over they will see that star again. Astronomy, modern astronomy makes the case, proves the case, something happened in the sky...not once but twice...as the gospel records. They saw it. And they found Him. And His mother Mary. And then what? Dreams. Visions? A message from God! Not to return to Herod. Not to tell Herod where the child was. They take to the road with their caravan....and they disappear, from history, never another word about them.

Matthew, the former tax collector, the transformed follower of Jesus, whose transformation is evidenced by his giving back money to those from whom he literally had swindled it; Matthew tells us this story of the 1st Miracle that marks the birth of Jesus Christ into our world, and into our lives.

Let us pray;

Lord, our Redeemer and our God, the journey of the Magi speaks to our hearts about revelation. A star becomes a sign and then a sign post. It led them, as you have led us, to your wonderful word, which leads us to you as your Spirit touches our lives. Grant we pray that the miracles of your grace may still melt our hearts in this precious season. Receive the glory and the praise which is at the heart of our celebrations. In Jesus name we pray. AMEN

