

**“Narnia and the Biblical World:
the Powerful Magic of the Gospel”**

Matthew 2:1-12

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Most of you probably figured I would be talking about *The Chronicles of Narnia* before now and it has taken some discipline to wait this long but the truth is I did not see the movie until the Friday before last. I read C.S. Lewis’ series of novellas some years ago and reread them more recently but have only just seen the first movie *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and I must say that it is faithful to the book.

The bit of dialogue that many clergy types have lifted for reflection is the exchange where it is said that Aslan, a Christ figure, is not a tame lion but he is good. Indeed Aslan is not a tame lion just as Jesus is not a tame Messiah. As today’s Gospel reading makes clear, even as a child the Christ is not tame. His birth stirs controversy and unsettles a ruler and a nation with him. But he is good.

Yet as insightful as this bit of dialogue is, what I value most about the film and the books is the mythic world Lewis has created. It is a magical world of beauty and truth, an enchanted world full of mystery and wonder where there is something the characters refer to as powerful magic. We can quibble with some of the details if we wish. Lewis’ close friend and fellow author J.R.R. Tolkien did not like *The Chronicles*. They were for him too simplistic and overtly allegorical, and anyone who has read *The Lord of the Rings* understands that Tolkien was not fond of simplicity. Comparing Lewis’ fiction with Tolkien’s is like comparing Jan Karon with Umberto Eco. Yet, though we may quarrel with the details in these films, hopefully we will not miss the message that is so true to the Gospel or the deep and powerful magic that is so moving.

I have a similar concern with today's Gospel reading, the traditional text of Epiphany, the story of the magi. It is possible for us to get stuck on the details of this text and thus miss the message and the magic. For scholars tell us, and rightly so, that this story does not take place at the same time as Luke's Christmas story. There are numerous clues within the story that Matthew is talking about a time when Jesus is not an infant but rather a toddler. The word for child tells us this much. So the magi and shepherds did not gather at the manger together. Furthermore, they were magi in the text, not kings; thinkers, astrologers; and how many of them there were we do not know. The number three has been assumed erroneously from the number of gifts.

So the bottom line is that we may have many assumptions about this story, reinforced by hymns like "We Three Kings," that are simply not correct. When we read the text more carefully and realize this, we may lose interest or get caught up in a debate about the details and thus allow the magic to drain out. But there is no need for this to happen because, even though we may have gotten some details wrong over the years, they can be easily corrected, and far more importantly, given the character of this story, the magic and the message do not hinge on the details.

The magic is related to the fact that this child, whatever his age, is not tame. Herod is frightened when he learns about a long awaited king to be born and all of Jerusalem is frightened with him because Herod is a jealous and brutal leader who has killed his own family members in the pursuit and protection of power. So Jesus' birth threatens the status quo and unsettles rulers just as his life and ministry will. But the most unsettling thing of all about this story, the deepest magic, the most important message has to do with the visitors who come to see Jesus, the magi. They are outsiders to the faith and the Jewish people, Gentles, heathen, yet they recognize who Jesus is and travel to celebrate his birth. These outsiders are somehow in on God's plan.

This is why we call this celebration, technically January 6, Epiphany. It is a word that means "appearance" or

“manifestation” and here it applies to the appearance of the Christ to the whole world including the Gentiles. It means that God’s activity in this unique life is about more than any one select or chosen people. It means that God is concerned about all people, all of creation. It means that God’s love extends to all.

Now, I realize that this may seem like a forgone conclusion to us in the church today but it was not a forgone conclusion in the covenant community at the time. The church began as a Jewish movement as Jesus and his first followers were all Jewish and long after Jesus’ death and resurrection there was vigorous debate as to whether Gentiles should ever been included in the spread of the Gospel. Read the book of Acts sometime with this issue in mind, especially the 15th chapter, and you will catch a glimpse of the passion in this debate. At times the story almost reads like the minutes from a Baptist business meeting!

What I am saying is that this message of inclusiveness which lies at the heart of Epiphany and by the way, the Gospel, was not a hum-hum, of course, sort of message. Rather it was a profoundly upsetting message... which it is to this day. Oh, we know the Gospel is for all nations. We believe that God’s love, as revealed in the Christ story, is for all people. It’s not the *all* part of the message that troubles us. It is some of the specific people.

I mean, does God really love our enemies whether they fly planes into buildings, take suicide bombs to funerals in Iraq or sit in the office or pew next to us and think of ways to knife us in the back with words? Does God love Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists as much as God loves Christians? Does God love homosexuals or homophobes, terrorists or terror-inspiring national leaders, whoever it is that we see as outside of God’s ways? That’s what Epiphany is about and that’s where inclusiveness starts, not with contemporary political correctness but with the ancient movement of the Divine. Make no mistake, this movement involves powerful magic. For it does not simply affirm the status quo but rather turns things upside down.

Thus, what we have in the story of Epiphany is really a parable in terms of literary analysis. Those who assess the structure of stories name three categories of stories – myths, parables, and action stories. Myths construct worlds. They provide order and meaning in the context of a rich array of signs and symbols. Lewis creates the world of Narnia, Tolkien creates Middle Earth, Lucas creates Star Wars, Rowland creates Harry Potter and a strangely familiar world of magic and intrigue. Action stories take place within worlds. They function in continuity with how a world is structured. But parables turn worlds upside down. John Dominic Crossan puts it this way. “You have built a lovely home, myth assures us; but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault.” (as quoted on p. 47 in *Story Theology*, Terrence Tilley) Parables shake the very foundations of our lives.

Again and again Jesus tells parables. A dreaded Samaritan ends up the hero. The wayward son gets the party. The lame and the cripple and the blind and other outsiders are invited to the great feast of eternity. And in the end Jesus’ whole life and ministry functions as a kind of parable. Those who lose life gain it, the last are first, outsiders become insiders, and death itself is transformed into life. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the stories of Jesus’ beginning, like the story of Epiphany, function in this very same manner, as parables.

So what does this mean for us? What is the parabolic impact of this story today? On one level we may simply view the Epiphany narrative as an affirmation of where we are and what we believe. God’s love is for all and thus we seek to take God’s love into all the world through various missions enterprises in Mexico and Kenya, India and Hong Kong, Haiti and The Dominican Republic. But, as I have tried to argue, we have not quite embraced this truth fully. We have not paid attention to the depth of this powerful magic. So, on a deeper level, the story challenges us to think in a more focused way about those we are tempted to separate from God’s love. Who are the people we would leave out and how might we adjust our thinking?

Yet perhaps there is an even more powerful, more shocking bit of magic to this story. Who embraces the Christ in Matthew's Epiphany story? The magi, not the insiders to faith but the outsiders. And this pattern does not stop here. John says the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us bringing grace and truth but his own people do not embrace him. I would caution us not to view this statement in an anti-Semitic way. Not all Jewish people rejected Jesus who was Jewish himself, but many did. Jewish leaders especially did. The most inside of insiders wanted no part of him while outsiders came and worshiped.

What might this say to us today? Our first thought may be that we in the church are, of course, the insiders but surely not the kind of insiders who refuse to embrace Jesus. But upon closer examination, do we embrace Jesus fully? Do we embrace his way of life, of sacrifice and self-giving love, of forgiveness and reconciliation, of loving enemies and praying for persecutors? Is it not the case that many within the church struggle to honor in daily life the Christ who is born while some outside the institutional church, say Gandhi, for example, walk in Jesus' ways?

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner put it this way (p. 15). "The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look. The invisible church is all the people God uses for (God's) hands and feet in the world. Nobody can find out who they are except God. Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap." There is truth in these words. There is a visible church and an invisible church. God's reign is ever larger than we think.

Habitat for Humanity is one ministry that honors this principle as anyone who shares the Christ-like concern to provide decent housing to people in need is invited to participate in the building of affordable homes. I will never forget some of the experiences of forming a Habitat chapter in Warren County, North Carolina years ago. In particular, I recall

the night a steering committee looked at the covenant principles of Habitat one of which says basically that anyone who embraces Jesus' way is invited to join in the organization's work. The local Health Department Director, a friend and a former Lutheran minister, said with a measure of sarcasm, "Well, that's certainly an inclusive principle!" obviously thinking that this principle required volunteers to sign on the dotted line to the Christian kerygma, to be a member of the visible church. But, as I pointed out at that meeting, that is not what the principle means.

It means that anyone who embraces Jesus' brand of compassionate concern for people in need is invited to join in the work of Habitat. And indeed people of many faiths and no faith do and in the process we might say that such people echo the spirit of Epiphany, that parabolic spirit of turning upside down all assumptions about who is in and who is out, who is with God and who is not. I seem to recall a little parable Jesus told about a man who asked two sons to do a job. One said he would but didn't while the other said he wouldn't but did. "Who did the will of the father?" Jesus asked, but it wasn't really a question.

I realize there are many in the church today who struggle with this whole approach to scripture as myth, parable and action story. There are many who want faith served up in more black and white terms, not the glorious array of colors one finds in Narnia. "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles!" some say, "We have to know who is in and who is out!" I couldn't possibly disagree more. In fact, to view the biblical story as such a rigid rule book to be taken literally from beginning to end is to rob it of its mystery, its magic, its power to transform lives. One theologian has said that the greatest problem facing American churches now is literalism (*Weavings*, Jan./Feb., 2006, p.6). So it is. So it is.

The Bible points to something larger, something more mysterious, something powerful and almost magical as a child is born, outsiders become insiders and a world is turned upside down. This child is not tame nor is this story of Epiphany. But he and it are good, indeed very good for us all.

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