

The Kin-dom: It's For Everyone
Luke 2:8-20 and Matthew 2:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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You might have noticed in the bulletin that today's sermon has two titles. The first, "The Kin-dom: It's for Everyone", not only sounds more like a title I'm likely to come up with but also reminds us that we continue on this journey of exploring the idea of the kin-dom of God even as we continue through the Christmas season.

But, what about that second title?

As many of you are aware, on Wednesdays, the Bible Study group explores the texts that will be preached in coming weeks. A few weeks ago, when we were exploring these texts together, the group was in rare form and out of that conversation grew the second sermon title option: "Flying Saucers & Pot Luck Dinners", a reminder that these stories that we hear so often, that we celebrate at this time of year, that we take for granted, have much more going on than we sometimes acknowledge and offer many questions.

And so, today, we are going to look again at these stories together.

But, before we get to shepherds and magi, we must remember the event at the center of their visits – the birth of a child. Mary and Joseph, who according to Luke were visitors in Bethlehem, gave birth to a baby and named him Jesus (the figurines are put in place).

And what's interesting is that in many ways this part of the story – the birth narrative – could end there. We could hear the pronouncements about who Jesus was and who he was to be. We could hear that he was born. Mary and Joseph could just do what they came to do and then pack up and go home. And we could skip straight to the stories of Jesus in the temple at 12 years old, on to Jesus' baptism, and right into his ministry.

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While we have gotten used to fuller nativity scenes with more characters...while we have gotten used to hearing of visits from shepherds and magi...one could argue that we don't really need them, that we could get on with the story without them and Jesus would still be Jesus. If we didn't know about these visitors already, we might not even miss them or think to ask who came to see the child. And yet they bring much to our story.

So, it makes sense that we should spend some time wondering what we can learn from them. After all, if they are no more than photographs in a baby's scrapbook, then why do we still hear their stories? There must be something here for us.

So, let's turn first to the part of this story that comes from the Gospel of Luke – the visit of the shepherds. This visit begins with an angelic announcement – or, as was pointed out in Bible study – perhaps a flying saucer sighting. In fact, both the shepherds and magi get their invitations from the skies – Luke tells us about angels, and later Matthew tells us of a star that initiates the travels of foreigners.

But, rather than dwelling on details about the possibilities of what they saw in the sky, let us turn our attention to the people who were invited – first, the shepherds (the figurines are put in place).

So, who were these shepherds? What do we know about them?

We talk often about who they were – and most often when looking at this story we talk about them as outsiders, as lower-class people. So, let's think a little more about this. Shepherds were at least somewhat nomadic...they moved around with the sheep. They were often unmarried men without children, sometimes the younger children in their own family, those who didn't have the big inheritance and wouldn't necessarily be land owning. In some instances, they were watching their own or their family's own flocks, but often they were hired help, watching

the flocks of others. Even though they often worked together, it was a largely solitary job. They weren't in the middle of the community's action. They weren't often in the know. They likely had more conversations with sheep than with people.

So, what's the big deal about them being the first to hear word of Jesus' birth? What's the big deal about them showing up first to meet the baby?

Well, the shepherds were, to say the least, unexpected. For many reasons they would not have been the ones anticipated to know what was going on before anyone else. Nor would they have been the ones people would expect to get a special message. And, the reality is, it would have been a burden for them to respond...after all, their first commitment was to tend the sheep. And even if they were willing to respond, when Luke tells us that people were amazed upon hearing what the shepherds said, that too should catch our attention because we might seldom listen to people like the shepherds.

And yet, let us remember that Jesus' story is filled with unexpected voices not only proclaiming important messages, but being listened to. Just think about it – the shepherds at the time of his birth, the woman at the well during his ministry, the women who were the first to proclaim the empty tomb.

The shepherds are only the first in a line of unexpected and even, we might say, unauthorized people, to both embrace and proclaim the broadness of God's reach.

And so, we need the shepherds because we need to be reminded that the word of God doesn't only come in the expected places but the unexpected as well. And their story reminds those of us who live in a culture built on busyness as a badge of honor, that we hear the call of God most clearly when we slow down, step away, and actually listen.

So, Luke gives us the story of the shepherds, but Luke isn't the only gospel writer to tell us about visitors who came to see Jesus. Matthew tells us about another set of visitors. These are the magi, those we have come to call kings or wisemen (the figurines are put in place). And while, in the nativity set, they all blend together and don't look at all distinct, they really couldn't have been more different from the shepherds.

So, we might first ask who they are? There are many traditions around these visitors, many different ideas about exactly who they were and where they came from. In fact, we call them different things – kings, wise men, magi.

The reality is that Matthew tells us little. Matthew simply says that magi (and again, that word can differ depending on which version of the Bible you are reading) from the east came looking for Jesus. The Greek word that was used there is magos which refers to a Persian priestly caste of Zoroastrianism. So, these were religious people who studied the stars – and remember, that was considered as reputable as good science is in our life and times. In studying the stars, it seems that they saw something that led them to investigate a birth, likely one connected with their own prophecies.

And so, they traveled – we do not know how far, but we can imagine it was quite some distance – to investigate what they saw. So, while the shepherds came from nearby but did so at risk to their livelihood, the magi would have traveled a great distance but done so as part of their priestly role.

And, of course, what we might know best is that they came bearing gifts. In fact, it's the first line of the most familiar song we sing about their visit: we three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar. And we hear that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And again, there are many traditions around these gifts...Are they gifts for a king? Gifts that

symbolize not only the life he will live but the death that will come? What happened to these items? Of course, as someone in Bible study pointed out, maybe the question we should really ask is: wouldn't Mary, Joseph and Jesus have been more well served if they had brought food, instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh? Why didn't they bring pot luck dinner dishes or at least a package of diapers?

See, again we often get caught up in the details that can produce interesting conversation and out of which many traditions have grown. We sometimes spend so much time with their titles and their numbers and the gifts that they brought, that we forget to ask what is significant about their visit to begin with. Because, while Matthew's story certainly names the idea of Jesus born as king of the Jews, the magi weren't only about that. They were also the first hint in his story that while he was born first among and for the Jews, the gift of God with us wasn't only for a certain people, but was for everyone, was a gift that reached beyond boundaries and borders.

We need the magi because we need to be reminded that when our instinct is to hesitate to welcome someone who is different from us, someone we don't already know, then we must remember the many, many times when not only did God's people welcome the strangers, but when God sent messages of great importance through them.

These visitors from some place out east remind us today that God is not ours alone, that we don't have a market on God's love or God's grace, and that means not us as Christians, not us as Americans, not us as white people, not us as people of the dominant culture.

Just in these early stories of Jesus, the visit of the shepherds that seemingly happened within days if not hours of his birth and the visit of the magi which likely happened in his toddler years, just in these two visits we are reminded how wide the reach and the love of God is.

And so, it is important that we pause with these stories. It is important that we do more than see these visitors as supporting characters in the drama of Jesus' birth. It is important that even when they blend together in our nativity sets, that we acknowledge the broad diversity that is represented just in these few people in Jesus' early years.

We have been celebrating the birth the Jesus, the birth of one in whom we have come to know the love of God more deeply, the birth of one who lived in ways that let a little more light into the world, the birth of one who came that we might know and share God's grace.

And we remember that while Jesus came for us, he didn't only come for us...while God loves us, God doesn't only love us. We need shepherds and magi...we need women and foreigners...we need tax collectors and prostitutes...we need Jews and Gentiles...we need all the many people with whom Jesus connected from birth through his death because they remind us that the kin-dom of God, the intended world that God created, is a world where we know that we are all connected and where all are welcome, no matter who they are.

While we aren't today surrounded by shepherds and magi, we are surrounded by people whose voices are rarely heard; people who come from different places and experiences, cultures and languages; people who don't quite fit in; people who aren't like us. And we are reminded in this birth story to pay attention, to listen, to welcome...because God's love is for everyone.

Amen.