

Wesley United Methodist Church

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Angels Among Us

Text: Matthew 2:1-23

Title: Get Up and Go: #MoreLife

From it's very beginning, the story of Jesus is a story of unlikely characters. It is a story of old people (Elizabeth & Zechariah), a virgin, a carpenter, and shepherds. The Jewish people were suffering under an oppressive regime, struggling to find enough work each day to feed their families, and hoping and believing that God had a better plan for them. But it's hard to imagine that these are the heroes, the people that God would have chosen to bring about world shattering changes. But then again, God is always doing the unexpected and using the most unlikely characters you could imagine. And strange as it has been, it's about to get even more unusual.

In today's scripture we heard about the Magi – people from a different place, a different culture, a different religion. The Jewish people typically did not associate with people outside of their culture and religion, so the appearance of the Magi is another one of those strange things that God does. They are another unlikely group of people to show up.

A variety of traditions have grown up around these visitors. Through the years, they have been called kings or Magi or wise men. Most likely they were astrologers who studied the stars and ancient manuscripts from around the world. Based on the gifts they brought, we can be fairly certain that they were well educated and wealthy. The Bible doesn't tell us how many there were, but the tradition has grown up that there were three of them – probably because of the three gifts. An Arabian tradition has called them Gaspar – a king from India, Melchior - a king from Prussia, and

Balthazar – a king from Arabia, representing three different races and symbolizing that Jesus would be Lord of all.

Their gifts represent three important things about Jesus. Gold was a gift for kings – signifying Jesus as King of Kings; frankincense was an incense used in worship – signifying the deity of Jesus; myrrh was a perfume used in burial – a symbol that Jesus would suffer and die.

Whoever they were, and how ever many they were, they are a sharp contrast to the poor, hard-working, smelly shepherds who were the first to come to see Jesus. At Jesus' birth, God included the shepherds, and now a group of foreigners of a different religion – to me, this is another indication of God's all inclusive love and reaching out to include all persons – even the ones we would least likely expect.

In keeping with our theme of Angels or messengers among us, the Magi became messengers bringing the news of the birth of a king to the powers that be – to Herod.

This is important because of what happened next. In an authoritarian hierarchy there can be only one king. Hearing of Jesus' birth would have been very bad news to Herod. Hearing that there had a been born a “king of the Jews” would have fed Herod's fear that the occupied Jews would rise up against Rome. Later, when he realized that the magi were not going to come back and tell him where to find Jesus, he ordered the baby boys in Bethlehem to be killed. With that he showed his true colors.

If ever there was a Hallmark feeling to the Christmas story it ended right here. Herod did not consider the Jews to be people of any consequence especially if their existence threatened his world and his power. When people are regarded as less than human, or not deserving of any consideration, it is not a big step to genocide. We have seen this many

times throughout history, and we find it here in the culture into which Jesus was born.

Here the angel issues a “wake-up call” to Joseph, warning him to flee. Only a baby or a toddler, Jesus is already a danger to the authorities. Already someone in power wants to kill him. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus became refugees fleeing to save their very lives. His family, like many of today’s refugees, fled the brutality of a ruler who had no compunction about putting to death anyone he deemed a threat. The same cruelty we see at the hands of some governments today was at play in the stories surrounding Christ’s birth.ⁱ

This is a part of the Christmas story that I prefer to try to skip over, but to do so, denies the reality that from the very beginning Jesus was a threat to the status quo. Throughout all of his life, Jesus was a threat to those who were in power and didn’t care about the people over whom they had control. We often prefer to think about Jesus as the one who is always with us, the one who walks with us through both the good and the bad times in life, and that is absolutely true. We sing, “What a Friend I have in Jesus, all my sins and griefs to bear” and that is true.

But this same Jesus who is our friend, our savior, God made flesh, doesn’t stop with us. Jesus’ love reaches out to all people – including both the smelly Jewish shepherds and the wealthy educated wise men from a distant culture and different religion. Jesus was a refugee, lived in poverty and under oppression and throughout his life always reached out to those who were most in need. With his message of comfort and healing for each of us, he also challenges us to look beyond ourselves. Near the end of his earthly life, Jesus told his disciples that when we feed the hungry, visit the

sick, clothe those in need, and whenever we do anything for those who are most in need, we are doing it for Jesus.ⁱⁱ

That's why we are called to look for the angels among us. We are called to not only receive but also to give – to share God's love – to get up and go and share the good news – to be angels for others.

Matthew concludes this part of the Christmas story by telling us that after the Magi worshipped the child and presented him with the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that “having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

I think we need to pay attention to this part of the story. I think this part of the story tells us about our lives in Christ. Once we encounter Jesus we are never the same and we always travel a different road. As we grow in our faith, hopefully it becomes something other than a Sunday morning commitment.

We know that for too many, religion gets a bad rap. There are an increasing number of people today who identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” or as one of the “nones,” those who have no religious connection. For far too many, religion is about rules and doctrines, things that restrict their lives. For too many, religion is about judgement – either the way they were judged or the way they judge others who think or believe differently than they do.

I read this week someone who wrote, “Religion means, in the words of the Beatles' song “Eleanor Rigby,” “wearing a face that she keeps in a jar by the door,” as she picks up the rice from somebody else's wedding.” Religion in this way is a façade, something we put on to look good. “Religion according to the same song, is “Father MacKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear; no one comes near.” Religion

means following centuries-old rituals and regulations, with no question about their meaning or relevance to daily life. For too many, religion is musty and dead; suppressing anything that might challenge that unthinking belief or might challenge someone to move out of their day-to-day comfort zones and experience life at its most thrilling and real.

“ Depending on where one comes out on things in these polarized and polarizing days, one might even be tempted at times to just throw off church and join the ranks of these spiritual-not-religious folk. But if we truly take Jesus and his story seriously, that way just won’t fly.”ⁱⁱⁱ

You see, religion is not old and boring. Religion is not dead; and it is not about adhering blindly to doctrines that some one told us a long time ago that we needed to believe. Religion is about being alive – about following the one who is always present with us, but who also had to flee for his life while only a child. Religion is about knowing that we never have to face anything alone, but it is also about treating each person with the same love that God shows to us.

It would be good if we really did extend the same respect and hospitality to each other as we preach we should or claim we do. Sadly if we are honest with ourselves, we know that one reason so many people are claiming to be “spiritual but not religious” is because all too often we hear of people, especially well known people, or people with influence, claiming to be Christian while doing things that seem so contrary to everything Jesus taught.

One telling example of this occurred in 1940 in the early days of the World Council of Churches. At an early meeting of the WCC, M.R. Zigler, a Church of the Brethren leader made a motion that all Christians resolve to no longer kill other Christians. Zigler was an advocate for peace in the

name of Jesus Christ and was instrumental in the founding of Church World Service, Christian Rural Overseas Program (CROP) and Heifer International. He also participated in the founding of the WCC and was highly respected by the delegates. His motion, that Christians should agree not to kill other Christians, failed, not after extensive debate, but for a far simpler reason. His motion failed because no one was even willing to offer a second to it.^{iv}

Not much has changed since the early days of the World Council of Churches. It is still too common for decisions to be made based on what is best for those making the decisions rather than on the needs of humanity and our responsibility to care for the most vulnerable.

We are called to live as though our faith makes a difference in our lives, in how we live, the decisions we make, the way we treat other people and everything we say and do. We are called to be angels in the world, messengers of more hope, peace, joy, love, and life to a world where some people are afraid that they will not have food to eat, a roof over their heads, or heat to stay warm while others are afraid that their wealth will be diminished, their power taken away or that they will somehow lose something if everyone has food, medical care, employment, and places of safety and warmth.

Howard Thurman, an African American author, theologian, philosopher, educator, civil rights leader, and Dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University wrote a poem called “The Mood of Christmas” that I think sums it all up nicely:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among people,

To make music in the heart.^v

Yes, I believe that there are angels among us. This year, as we put away our Christmas decorations, let us carry the message of Christmas with us every day. Let us be messengers, flying in the face of fear, saying no to the destruction of life and wellbeing wherever we see it. Let us be those who bring more hope, peace, joy, love, and life to our world.

ⁱ Hamilton, Adam. Faithful, Christmas Through the Life of Joseph. Loc 1117

ⁱⁱ Matthew 25

ⁱⁱⁱ Beginning of sermon from Web Site "Proclaim" for Dec 31, 2007 This and the two previous paragraphs are a summary of this section.

^{iv} Donald F. Durnbaugh, *Pragmatic Prophet: The Life of Michael Robert Zigler* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1989), 192.

^v Thurman, Howard