

Dear Friends,

**First Joseph, then the Kings** Joseph has been a busy guy this season. In Advent, we hear of him coming to grips with the news that his fiancée is pregnant with a child not his own. His first response is to dissolve the engagement quietly with no scandal or risk to Mary—this is, in fact, a remarkably generous instinct on his part. In a society which puts family and family reputation at the center of its life, someone who deviates from expected behavior puts everyone at risk and challenges the basic organizing principle of the whole community. From this perspective, Mary is not just personally dishonored, but if her transgression goes unpunished, the reasonable argument goes, it could open the door to other misbehavior and debase the way of life of a whole people. Joseph's decision to put her away quietly is his choosing mercy over justice.

But perhaps when Joseph thinks he is about to be more forgiving than most of his contemporaries, he has a dream and he remembers a prophecy, and together they call him to even more unexpected, and challenging, action. Joseph decides to continue the engagement, and to claim Jesus as his own (the significance of Joseph naming him in Matthew 1:25).

**The Dream and the Text** The dream may have been an angel appearing to Joseph (remember the Joseph of Genesis and his ability to hear God in dreams), but I wonder about a more modern interpretation. All sorts of things happen in dreams, but I think that sometimes they are the time and place when we sort out things which our conscious minds have blocked. Dreams are sometimes occasions in which we get in touch with what we know but do not know that we know. I suspect that Joseph's dream is when his mind begins to connect the stories of his people with his own immediate situation. Suddenly the prophecies, the family stories, the tales of exile and return are not simply dusty religious texts to bring out on formal religious occasions, but provide actual guidance and insight into what most troubles him now. Knowing the stories, the texts, gave Joseph insight into his immediate situation which he otherwise would not have had.

Part of Joseph's genius is that he realizes that the God who is the subject of all those old stories, is the same one calling to him now. And not just calling, but inviting him to see himself in that larger story, to see where he fits in, and, to a remarkable degree, to show him how it will all turn out. What God calls Joseph to is, at the same time, both very old and very new.

**Good but not religious** Putting Mary quietly away could be the strategy of a person who is good but not religious—it makes sense, it is, arguably, kind, and it seems to resolve the situation. Seeing in her pregnancy the beginnings of a larger story than Joseph could have otherwise imagined is the insight of a person who by the grace of God embraces a perspective not limited by his experience and his immediate culture. Joseph staying with Mary is not a loss and a compromise, but the result of his recognizing his deliverance into a completely new way of looking at himself and his world. Sometimes being good but not religious handicaps our thinking by cutting us off from a store of experience and insight gathered in a wide range of cultures over some three thousand years. To be good but not religious runs the risk of being, well, parochial; it produces a B- response—passing, but not as good as we can be.

**The Four Kings** The Three Kings are a mixed blessing. In fact, for most of Bethlehem, they are no blessing at all. For it is only from the Kings—the Magi—the Wise Men—that the other King, Herod, whom everyone else thought of as “King of the Jews,” heard about Jesus. But for the Kings going to Jerusalem and asking what they might have thought was an innocent question, “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” Herod might have remained happy on his throne and the baby boys of Bethlehem might have grown to adulthood undisturbed.

Despite all of Herod’s famed pragmatism, ruthlessness, and cunning diplomacy, he seems to have believed that his legitimacy as a monarch derived from some higher power than his own skill, powers, and ability. Why else would the rumor that there was a baby who was to be the King of the Jews disturb him? Herod’s real power—his soldiers, his control of the Temple, his impressive public works, his relationship with Rome—could in no way be diminished by the birth of a baby, even one born in the historically interesting town of Bethlehem.

And yet Herod was beside himself with anxiety, a fear which permeated the whole capital city, according to Matthew (“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...” Matthew 2:3). All it took to shake him to his core was the rumor that there was another who was to be King of the Jews. And this was no brigand warlord marching on Jerusalem at the head of a band of armed followers, but a baby whose own family had made no claim for him.

**Power and Pragmatism** Pomp and power characterized Herod’s entire style, but to puncture the illusion of his inherent authority, all it took was a rumor that someone else was intended to be the real King. All the trappings did not make him secure in his power and could not keep him in the role he coveted. He improvised a typical response—since he could not be sure which baby boy in Bethlehem was the boy in question, he simply ordered them all to be killed at once, without mercy and without exception. What a frightened, weak King to have to kill baby boys to stay in power.

And, of course, part of the irony for Matthew and his audience is that the pagan, foreign, gentile Kings, having no knowledge of God other than what they see in nature, see the true King of the Jews, while the King who has the Law and the Prophets and sits in the shadow of the Temple itself does all he can to destroy him.<sup>1</sup> With his pogrom of the young boys in Bethlehem, Herod transforms himself into Pharaoh, who had decreed a similar genocide in Egypt (Exodus 1:16) because he feared for his power. Herod not only falls short of the gentiles, he becomes indistinguishable from one of the worst of the oppressors of his people.

The more Herod tries to hold on to power by the approved techniques of his time and profession, the more quickly his grasp on his position weakens. One would not call him “good but not religious” but rather “hard-nosed” or “brutally pragmatic.” Once in World War II someone cautioned Stalin about alienating the Roman Catholic Church. “Tell me,” the Soviet ruler is said to have replied with undisguised scorn, “How many divisions has the Pope?” History, which was to have swept the Church aside, is now the only place where the Soviet Union may still be found.

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<sup>1</sup> Jump ahead fifty years when Gentiles were welcoming the new teaching about Jesus, and the people of Israel were persecuting those who called Jesus the Messiah, and you might imagine why Matthew’s juxtaposition of the Three Kings with King Herod had such appeal in the early church.

**Find the SAT word** The stories of Joseph and of the Kings suggest to me that seeking to understand the will of God is not the opposite of pragmatism but maybe its highest form, or even (and this is what I really wanted to say) its apotheosis. So that studying the scriptures, cultivating a spiritual life so that the vocabulary and meaning of the old stories become real and present in our own circumstances, and openly seeking to approach God with awe, wonder, and love are not a flight from real life, but the early steps of engaging real life in a deeper and more productive way. We can be better than “good but not religious,” and we can be more practical than elevating the ad-hoc thrashing about for quick solutions and calling it “pragmatism.”

We will be in the season of Epiphany from January 6 until March 9. It is a time set aside to consider how Jesus shows himself, his identity, and his way of life to the world. I invite you to enter into this season with the active agenda of seeking to see how these stories might illuminate the concerns you face now. You may not be as challenged as Joseph was, but I am sure there are things before you which cause you concern and even perplexity. From Joseph’s positive example learn to distill from the ancient stories wise guidance for current action. And learn from the negative example of Herod as well. Consider what is really pragmatic, honor the integrity of the resources of our tradition, acknowledge the wisdom God might offer from an unexpected source, and beware of becoming the very person you would least like to be. As I have said before, the stakes are high, but when we pay attention to what we have been given, the odds are good.

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