

bread for the journey

The Magi's Magic and Myrrh

The clock is ticking.

The good Lord in His wisdom has led me to a countdown. Though it seems I have more to say, I don't have an infinite number of times to say it. And frankly, I don't always know quite how to say it well. Anything, for example, I have to share with you today is inspired by one of my theologically astute heroes—the Reverend John Buchanan, the noted Presbyterian minister and longtime editor of *The Christian Century* magazine,—who, too, has retired from full time ministry. As the train is leaving the station, it is as if he sticks his head out the window of the last car and shouts, “And one more thing I have to say to you.” So, if anything sticks to your soul for having read this meditation, thank that wise old man, John Buchanan.

It's about the Magi's contribution to our understanding of God's character. You know, do you not, our recovery is predicated upon getting our act together with the God of our understanding. Failing significant progress in the spiritual dimension, the journey toward recovery will be difficult if not impossible for you. And me.

Anyway, we thought the Christmas pageant was the main event. Well, maybe it's not. Maybe it is Epiphany. Christmas is over and we can get down to the heart of the matter. I don't mean to minimize the importance of Jesus' birth, but come now, what can a baby do other than to coo cutely in his mother's arms. Of course, knowing who that baby is stops us dead in our tracks and provokes more than an “Awww, isn't he cute?” response. Knowing who the child is makes us stand up in awe and say, “Wow! Imagine that! God is with us!” Now what? So what? Here's what's what.

Matthew's account of the birth suggests there is more to the

story. As the great, but late, news commentator, Paul Harvey used to say, “Now, for the rest of the story.” The visit of the Magi and the magic they brought is critical to our understanding of the “God of our understanding.” I mean, if we are going to do our level best to grasp what it means to say, “I believe in God, I trust God, I surrender my life and will to God,” then, for God's sake, we owe it to ourselves to be as clear as possible in our effort to understand what we are talking about. Yes? Yes.

The magi may have been astrologers. They brought magic but were not magicians. Tradition suggests there were three of them, but it may have been a tour bus full of folks who heard about the birth of Jesus. It is said they came to see and worship him. They came from the east—perhaps, Iran or Iraq, or Saudi Arabia—nations whose importance to the peace of the world was then and is now a critical issue.

Interesting. Garrison Keillor imagines the Magi may have been Lutherans because, “They brought myrrh with them, which everyone knows is a sort of casserole made from hamburger and macaroni.” Before they hopped aboard the tour bus taking them to the holy land, one of their wives may have said to one of them, “Here, take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish.”

What's really interesting is the likelihood these fellows were Gentiles—non Jewish. Already, Jesus—a Jew—was shattering religious tradition by bringing outsiders inside. Sound familiar? Before the Jesus story is over, this Jesus will shatter boundaries of race, class and gender. And the marginalized—the outliers, the poor, the prostitutes, the unbelievers, the unwashed, the diseased, the varmints and even members of the military industrial complex—are welcome at his table.

By the way, the next time you read the 23rd psalm—the one everyone turns to for comfort during a rough patch in his or her life—read the whole thing. It's jail music. Or funeral music. I know. But the time has come or will come when you and I need to move forward. Get over yourself. Get past the part where you

(continued on back)



are merely encouraged because the Lord is your shepherd and you shall not be in want and though you walk through the dark night of your soul in death's valley you need not fear because God is with you. Get past that part. Absorb it and then go forward.

Read the rest of the promise: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Get that. Get to the heart of it: God prepares a banquet for you. Even you. And guess who is at the banquet—your enemies. Peace reigns. Imagine that. That's the kind of stuff the Magi brought with them. This busload of motley tourists—the whole gang of them—brought with them a curiosity about Jesus. And in so doing they helped define the character of God this child represented.

And what was the defining character of God the Christ child brought? He brought a spirit of inclusivism. That means everyone belongs. No one is an outsider. No more them versus us. No more, we are right and you are wrong. No more second class excluded from first class. On a recent flight, I was sitting in the front row of economy class. I could smell the beef tenderloin in first class. I could see the chocolate cake for desert. But I could only see and smell not taste and have. So I stuck my long legs and size 13s into the back row of the first class cabin. For spite. That will show them. But seriously folks, that's what Epiphany means: God shows up in economy class and says, come forward to the first class cabin. Eat, drink and be merry. The table is set

for us, all of us. Miserable sinner or squeaky-clean saint. Now, that's the rest of the story, which says something eternal about God's character.

The story of the Gospel is eloquently distilled and summarized in the common, sensibly written Big Book of AA. It "is about a radical inclusivity that threatens all who are invested in exclusivity of any kind." The story of AA is built upon the foundation of the gospel message. The Jesus of the gospels is opposed to religious traditions that specialize in exclusivity. He had no time and gave no breathing room to religion as a definer of tribal boundaries of who was "in," and who was "out," who was "us," and who was "them," and who was "right," and who was "wrong." The story of the Magi's magic and myrrh challenges every established religious or social structure that vehemently keeps insiders secure and pure but keeps the outsiders and unwashed away. Ostracism is and never will be part of the gospel message. AA and NA follow suit. Keep coming back. You belong.

The magi returned home. No longer the same. "Treatment," too, will do that to you. 



The Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain

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is a bi-monthly news and views letter from Rev. Dr. William Lenters, Chaplain at Rosecrance. Bread for the Journey is written on behalf of people who live with substance use and mental health disorders. Together, and by God's grace, we will try to make a difference.

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