

January 3rd, 2021

Guest Speaker Rev. Georgeanne Bennett

FCC Sermon, 1-3-21, Matthew

In August of 2013, NASA's Curiosity Rover celebrated the one year anniversary of its landing on Mars by "singing" Happy Birthday to itself in a Martian crater, 208 million miles from home.

Someone commented on-line that this made them sad, because this lonely little rover was all alone.

And here is the response that came to that:

"No guys you don't understand. The soil testing equipment on Curiosity makes a buzzing noise and the pitch of the noise changes depending on what part of an experiment Curiosity is performing, this is the way Curiosity hums to itself.

So some of the finest minds currently alive decided to take incredibly expensive, important scientific equipment and mess with it until they worked out how to move in just the right way to

sing Happy Birthday, then someone made a cake on Curiosity's birthday and took it into Mission control so that a room full of brilliant scientists and engineers could throw a birthday party for a non-autonomous robot many millions of miles away, and listen to it sing the first ever song sung on Mars, which was "Happy Birthday".

This isn't a sad story, this a happy story about the ridiculousness of humans and the way we love messing with things. We built a little robot and called it Curiosity and flung it out into the stars to go and explore places we can't get to, yet, because it's name, "Curiosity", is in our nature. And then, just because we could, we taught it how to sing.

That's not sad, that's awesome."

So, I have to say I don't think this is about the ridiculousness of human, I think this is about the way human beings are driven to storytelling and meaning-making. And I DO agree that it is awesome!

Which brings us to “The Christmas Story”. We all know it, don’t we? The birth of the baby whose birth changes everything. The luminous baby lying in a manger, looked over by his tired teen-aged mother and his somewhat dazed step-father, Joseph, and surrounded by cows, sheep, donkeys, probably chickens, maybe flamingos and kangaroos, possibly a super hero or two. Throw in some shepherds and angels, then add three Oriental Kings. On camels. Bearing gifts.

Except that story is cobbled together from the only two Gospels that even talk about Jesus’ birth, Matthew and Luke, and most of the details have been fleshed out, so to speak. Embellished by story-telling human beings.

There are shepherds in the Bible? Well then, there must be sheep! Jesus is lying in a manger? Well then, there must be cows, donkeys. Probably chickens. I made up the bit about the flamingos and kangaroos. There are Oriental kings? Well then, there must be camels; did you

think kings would walk from Persia? And oh, by the way, there are three gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh? Well then, obviously there are three kings.

Except that the original Greek said “magi”, and the author was possibly referring to Zoroastrians from Persia or thereabouts. Astrologers. And I’m guessing that astrology was just WAY too woo-woo for later medieval translators, who substituted “kings” for magi or astrologers. At some point, the three were named; Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar and given origin stories. The Catholic Church even made them saints, when it was VERY doubtful they were even Christians.

Storytelling, meaning-making. Because our human imaginations supply what we need to make a good story. Details, many, many details. To make the bare bones of the story come alive and lodge itself in our hearts. Add all the animals you need to flesh out the story.

And while we're at it, let's imagine the actual journey of the Magi, however many of them there were. Because we DO really believe they existed, don't we? The impact of this baby's birth must have somehow shaken the foundations of the earth and the vibrations of that must have been seen in the signs and portents read by distant astrologers. That feels right to me. That feels true in a way that doesn't depend on facts.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that, "...a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of the three. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives."

So off they set, being pulled west towards Jerusalem, at which point the star or stars apparently wandered off leaving them stranded in

Jerusalem. Because somehow they all decided that it would be a grand idea to ask Herod where this new baby king was. I mean, Herod didn't have the best rep; he was a pretty slimy little client king under Rome's rule.

But the writer of Matthew has some points to make here. One, Herod isn't the REAL king of the Jews, and presumably he pretty much knows that. Two, here is a good place to bring in some prophecy from the Jewish Scriptures, so when Herod asks his priests and scribes to figure out just where this baby king might be, they find an answer of sorts in the scroll of Micah, pointing out that the REAL king, the Messiah, the one to shepherd God's people, will be born in Bethlehem. Three, Herod really IS a slimeball and wants the magi to sleuth out the exact location of the baby so Herod can kill it.

By this time, the Magi are wise indeed to Herod's ways and give him a solid, "Yeah, sure", about coming back to tell him where the baby is,

and go on their way, the stars firmly fixed back in their eyes. And they are again guided, this time to the right place. A place of opening, a place of joy. And, we would love to think, to a happily-ever-after sort of life.

But I wonder. T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi", imagines a very different story. This one:

"A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey:

The ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter. And the camels galled, sorefooted, refractory, lying down in the melting snow.

There were times we regretted the summer palaces on slopes, the terraces, and the silken girls bringing sherbet. Then the camel men cursing and grumbling and running away, and wanting their liquor and women,

and the night-fires going out, and the lack of

shelters, and the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly and the villages dirty and charging high prices:

A hard time we had of it.

at the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, with the voices singing in our ears, saying that this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley, wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;

with a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness, and three trees on the low sky, And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,

Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver, and feet kicking the empty wine-skins.

But there was no information, and so we continued and arriving at evening, not a moment too soon

Finding the place; it was (you might say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again, but set down this, set down this: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly.

We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.”

NOT a very hopeful poem, not one we are comfortable associating with this joyous event. But then this baby didn't come to bring unending joy to the world, despite the Christmas carol. This baby would grow up to shake the world to its very foundations, to leave many folks clutching their

alien gods and realizing that they just weren't enough anymore. This man would force many folks to reconsider what is important and what isn't, and to ask His followers to do hard things.

Maybe the Magi were the first who had to confront the limitations of their knowledge and their views of the world. Maybe they were the first outside of a few family members to realize the possibilities that God was opening up before God's beloved human beings. That God was doing a radically new thing, and that the world had changed. Forever.

So, let's continue to imagine the Magi's story. Of course they felt as though some part of them had died. Because it had, and resurrection is hard, so hard. But they had already done the hardest thing. They had left their faraway homes led by something irresistible and now they had to return as different people, unrecognizable people, people who probably made their old friends uncomfortable.

The stars that had lodged in their eyes had been replaced by a seed of God that they were now required to carry into the world. They were vessels shaped by God to model a new way of being in their transformed lives.

How were they to do that? The Magi chose another road to take them home not only to avoid Herod, but because ANY road they chose would have been different. Because THEY were different. They had been changed by their meeting with this baby. And now they had to figure out a new way to BE, a new way to live with who they had become.

We, like the Magi, need to figure out a new way to be in this world, because this world is broken and desperately in need of change, and only those who recognize the brokenness can change it. And, of course, the world doesn't much WANT to change. It is running along quite smoothly, working quite well for those with privilege. Why change if you are white, straight,

cis-gender and well-off? Even if the only privilege you have is your white skin, you can still know that you are not at the bottom of the caste system in this country. Making changes would/could shake up the system and the system works. For some.

And here we are at the beginning of a new year. A better year, please God! A year when we must all choose another road. We must choose to be more kind, to try HARD to understand where others are coming from, to value empathy above all else, to listen more than talk, to speak up when we are confronted by injustice.

We need to recognize whatever privilege each of us has and work to extend that and more to others. We are called to let our lives be shaped by God; to be seeds of God that we carry out into the world.