

Where Is the Child?

Matthew 2:1-12
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Where is the child? In the story for today from Matthew's Gospel, this question is posed by two very different voices: one is a loving, adoring voice; the other a beguiling, conniving voice. One intends to find and worship the child while the other intends to find and destroy the child. The Magi come for praise. Herod has violence on his mind. Both ask the same question, 'where is the child?', yet their intentions are one hundred eighty degrees apart! I was really struck by the storyteller's use of this simple question to reveal the true passions of the heart: one would adore the Christ-child; one would have him eliminated.

When one is secure in one's own authority, then the authority of others is not intimidating. But when one is insecure about one's own inner authority, then even a hint of another's authority is unsettling. The Magi evidently know who they are, know how they are grounded, and know what is their ultimate loyalty. For when they see the star and put two and two together, they are not repelled by this new authority, born in Bethlehem; they are drawn to it! Herod, on the other hand, evidently is insecure about who he is, what he trusts, where his ultimate loyalties lie. For when he gets word of the birth of this new authority figure, he goes berserk! He can not tolerate, much less adore, this new presence of humble royalty.

So, a first lesson from this story has to do with the importance of coming to a healthy grip on one's own, personal authority. That is a parenting issue. That is a mentoring issue. That is a spiritual issue.

In the Christian community, we understand baptism as the source of our authority. It's the waters of baptism that authorize us for loving. My ordination certificate may authorize me to conduct weddings, but it is our baptism that authorizes us to love, to love without condition, to love without holding back, to love in such a way we might be accused of being "loving fools." I have my ordination certificate framed and under glass and hanging in a prominent location; I have no clue what became of my baptism certificate! There is something wrong with that picture!

Today we authorized Abigail Grace Butzgy! Our work, as a church family, is to do the sprinkling, but then, over the next fifteen years, our work is to help her come to a healthy understanding of what this authority for loving really means.

In my lifetime, I have known the Magi and I have known King Herod. I met Herod in Malawi in 1969. His name was The Ngwzi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the president of that young nation. He had established a law forbidding any organization or church or club or committee or sports team or debating society to have a president. There could be only one president in Malawi and that would be The Ngwazi, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Offenders were punished by imprisonment. He would be a modern representation of King Herod, there are many others, paranoid about the authority of others, not the kind of leader we'd want running our country!

I met the Magi in the early 1990's when I met Dr. Ali Antar, a trustee of Hartford Seminary, a leader of the Islamic mosque on the Berlin Turnpike, a religious scholar. We sat down over coffee and he asked me, honestly, to tell him all about my Christianity! It was as if he had seen my star, my joy! He was intrigued, seemed to have no other place he'd rather be, and wanted to hear all about it! He listened to every word!

We talked of the things that pertain to the soul. He would be a modern Magi, drawn to the authority of love. When one is secure in knowing one's own soul, then one is not threatened, but delighted by the prospect of meeting God's Christ.

As I continued to reflect on the Epiphany story, I realized the question, 'Where is the child?' is a modern question, a pressing question for our time! Reading the newspapers and watching the evening news on CNN, I see that children today are still at risk in the hands of adults confused about their authority. Where is the child? The answer we give has something to do with knowing who is asking the question.

Is it a Herod voice or a Magi voice? Is it someone who has the best interest of the child at heart? Or is it someone determined to violate a child's well-being?

Is it not deeply troubling to learn there are predatory adults looking for unsuspecting children on the streets of the internet? Is it not deeply troubling to realize how at risk young teens are to sophisticated pedophiles who know how to hook and trap and snare? Is it not deeply troubling to hear stories of adults preying on the imaginations and then the bodies of the innocent ones?

In this coming year, I will be asking the Social Action Board to name the ways our church can stand up for justice for children who are subject to exploitation. To love children these days is to confront the Herods who lurk on the Net. I'll be asking the Discipleship Education Board to name the ways our church can exercise its authority for loving children by empowering children and their parents to use computer technology safely.

We are baptized with authority to love. Therefore, our baptism certificate should hang right up there, side by side, with our other credentials, next to the PhD certificate, next to the Sigma Cum Laude certificate, next to the GDE certificate, next to the Who's Who in American Life citation. We are baptized with authority to love; therefore, let us use this authority and not be shy when it comes to resisting the seduction of those who intend to do harm to children.

In this coming year, I will ask the Mission Board to continue to be the modern day Magi in the world, noticing Hartford's children and ministering unto them through the Summer in the City program of the Christian Activities Council; noticing the children of Malawi orphaned by AIDS, ministering to them through the Sisters of Mercy at St. Mary's Orphanage in Chezi. I'll be asking the Mission Board to notice the children of Lakota families in western South Dakota, where alcoholism devastates the quality of life, by ministering through the Sioux YMCA.

The Mission Board has been like the Magi, recognizing the star that guides them to the stables where children are still at risk and by partnering with the Cromwell Children's Home, The Interval House, the Salvation Army summer camps, and the ABC House. I'll be asking them to love children even more.

Where is the child? Matthew places this question on two sets of lips. In the Gospel story, an angel intervenes to expose the violent intent of Herod and to warn the Magi to return to their homeland via a different path. Thank God for that angel! Where is that angel today? Is the angel not the church of Jesus Christ? Is it not South Congregational Church? Through our worship, our ministry and our mission, let us see the Christ in all the children of the world, and advocate for the wholeness of their bodies and their minds and their souls.

This is how the ancient story was speaking to me anew this week.
And I share this reflection with you now in the greatest of hope,
Amen!