

## Wiseguys and One Scared King

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Matthew 2:1-12  
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Eleven years ago—when the calendar turned from 2000 to 20001—I got inspired by the televised review of New Year’s celebrations around the world, starting in Australia. I stayed up to write a poem. Here’s a part of it. (The reference to “Gregory” is about Pope Gregory. It was during his reign as Roman Catholic pontiff in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the Julian calendar was replaced by the Gregorian calendar.)

*Here in the most ancient of hills  
of Southern Appalachia  
languid snow falls with measured pace,  
neither rushed nor ambitious.  
Unlike the televised revelers  
from Sydney to San Francisco  
during last eve’s revolving  
midnight watch,  
the turn of time feels  
especially fraught with  
meaning. . . .*

*What time is it, really?*

*The calendar turns again,  
only this time in multiple ways. . . .  
Zero-one, zero-one, zero-one:  
a once-in-a-millennium event.  
Ten cycles of ten-by-tens of years  
have transpired since ol’ Gregory  
posited his new time-keeping calculus. . . .*

*Those of more ancient bias  
are unimpressed.  
For Jews, the year is 5761.  
In the far reaches of the Orient  
the Chinese mark year 4699  
though even the religiously-hostile  
People’s Republic functions  
under the Pope’s chronology. . . .*

*What time is it, really?*

*By lunar or solar computation?  
Do we reckon according to*

*Babylonian or Balinese or  
Baha'i regimen?  
The Hindu or the Islamic Hirji  
or the Himba people of Namibia,  
who simply mark the new year  
by the coming of rain (the two words  
being the same in their language)?  
Some forty time-telling calendars  
are still in use around the world, and not even Christians  
can agree on their own,  
with Gregory's calculation splitting  
East from West.*

That last line has to do with the fact that some Eastern Orthodox traditions still use the Julian calendar when it comes to the church year. So Easter and Christmas are usually celebrated at different times from the Western church.

The early Christian community had little interest in Christmas. It wasn't until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that observing a holiday, on the supposed birth of Jesus, became widespread. And the date chosen was to compete with a popular pagan festival.

Hijacking others' cultural traditions is one of the privileges that come with being the official state religion, which Christianity finally achieved under the Emperor Constantine. It was also about that time that the church, now flexing its political muscles, invented the notion of "just warfare." Constantine, and every imperial agent since then, benefited greatly. Now, they could wage war in the name of peace.

It all gets rather confusing—this calendar business. And sometimes strange. Expect to hear a lot more in the coming months of the fact that the ancient Mayan calendar runs out at the end of 2012.

Nancy and I stayed up until midnight last night to watch the ball drop in Times Square in New York City. One of my images of hell is standing in the crowd at Times Square on New Year's Eve. After the clock struck midnight, one of the very first things I thought was, "How long will it take until I start writing 2012, instead of 2011, on checks?" I'm not much of a romantic when it comes to New Year's Eve observance.

In the Western Christian tradition, this coming Friday, January 6, is the Feast of Epiphany, officially ending the Christmas season. You've heard of that season from the song about the 12 days of Christmas, which begins with: "On the first day of Christmas, my true love sent to me. . . a partridge in a pear tree."

The confusion about calendars applies to the Feast of Epiphany as well. For some Christians, Christmas begins at sundown on January 6. Others associate Epiphany with the baptism of Jesus: Epiphany is what happened when the Holy Spirit descended from heaven as a dove.

But for most Christians in the Western tradition, Epiphany is about "We Three Kings." You know—the wiseguys, from the East, probably Persian, probably from the region now known as Iraq. They weren't kings at all, but probably a combination of priest and scientist and royal advisor. The text from Matthew doesn't say they rode camels. The text doesn't even say there were three of them.

That's part of the background we've colored in to appropriate and domesticate the story for our own cultural purposes. Appropriating and domesticating biblical stories has long been practiced by imperial powers. It's what King Herod, the Jewish collaborator with Rome, wanted to do when he asked the magi to report back on what they found after paying a visit to Bethlehem.

The pretense of piety is standard practice for political strategy. Lord knows we'll be getting a lot more of that here over the next 12 months. Every political actor bent on ruling knows that epiphanies must be appropriated and domesticated for partisan use if order and stability are to be maintained.

I love the word *epiphany*. Just the sound of it. *Epiphany*. The word has a comforting and soothing ring to it. It feels like a word to be said while sipping hot buttered rum and nibbling on holiday treats from the oven. *Epiphany*. The last of 12 days of Santa Claus presents and stocking stuffers and honey-baked ham. And maybe of "b-double-e-double-r-u-n" beer runs.

One of my favorite quotes about the Christmas season is from my friend Kyle Childress, a pastor in Texas:

*The tamed piety of the conventional church wants an innocent baby who comes gently into our secure lives and keeps everything benign and friendly. It may be conventional and it may be tame but it is not biblical and it is not Christian. Advent is about both hope and hurt; pain and risk, as well as excitement and joy, are part of the adventure.*

Both the hope and the risk get summed up on Epiphany. The word means "manifestation," or "appearance," or "revelatory moment." Theologically speaking, epiphanies signal something new, but—at least for a lot of folk—something uncomfortable, as well. Biblical convictions always impinge on political realities. The *something new* breaking out is good news for some and bad news for others.

Epiphanies are often disruptive. For new learning to occur, old lessons have to be unlearned. For new public policies to take effect, old policies have to be dismantled. A lot of people have invested heavily in those old policies. Herod certainly understood this.

Is there any epiphany moment for us, right here, right in this Circle? Is there something new thing to be learned; and if so, what old things must be unlearned?

There are probably several ways to respond to that question. But for today I want to focus attention on a recent event in our congregational life. I think it was an epiphany moment. I don't know all the implications—we'll have to sort those out together. But let me say what I think has happened.

For those of you who weren't here, two weeks ago, right in this room, members of our Circle made some difficult choices relating to our new year's budget. A month earlier we gave initial approval to some ambitious increases in our budget. It included salary raises for staff and the expansion of our children's educator's staff time. Unfortunately, once all the financial pledges for the coming year were tallied, we realized we couldn't realistically support the new budget. So instead of salary raises, there was a slight decrease. And the added time for our children's education coordinator was removed.

It was disappointing. To everyone. Who among us couldn't use a raise about now?

And I'm guessing most of you would agree with me when I say the most important developmental direction for us is how we provide sufficient resources devoted to

nurturing our children's spiritual growth. If as a congregation we could do only one thing—just one thing—I believe that nurturing faith in our children would be that one thing. That's why we approved in our November business meeting a plan to double the hours of our children educator position from 10 to 20 hours per week over a three-year period. We had hoped the first four of those 10 hours would happen this year. Now we have to rethink that plan.

It's disappointing. It feels a little bit like a failure.

But I don't think it was. I think it was an epiphany moment for us. And even though I wasn't in the room (all of us on the staff were dismissed, to encourage frank and honest conversation about salaries separated from personal identities), I have come to believe that that meeting was a turning point for us.

It was a good turning point, despite our disappointment—one that in the future we will look back upon as a sign of the maturing of our congregation. (We've been in a whole season of maturation, given the grace and wonder of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations last month.) Let me briefly mention 3 reasons why I think this is true.

First: Two weeks ago was the first time as a congregation that we had to make really difficult financial choices. It was the first time our natural idealism has been clobbered with facts-on-the-ground reality.

Spiritual growth always plays out in the midst of that confrontation. That's why spiritual growth is often difficult, sometimes disappointing, and occasionally downright painful. It's rarely smooth. Faith is formed in the midst of storm. Learning to live with limits is a profound lesson. In fact, the fate of the earth itself is contingent on the human community learning to live with limits.

A second reason why that business meeting was an epiphany moment for us: This was the first time lay leaders of the congregation were primarily responsible for laying out the options, for crunching the numbers, for suggesting the specific direction we need to take to remain healthy. It would be impossible for me to exaggerate how significant this is. To put it succinctly: We done grewed up!

Your founding pastors are still in place; but as a congregation, you've learned you can breathe on your own, come what may in the future. Founders of any organization have a way, over time, of becoming controllers of the organization, even when they don't mean to. Circle of Mercy, I am proud to say, has just moved beyond that border.

The third reason I'm hopeful is because—from every account I've heard—the process of decision-making in the meeting two weeks ago was itself a form of nonviolent struggle. Decisions about money are always the most difficult, are fraught with the most emotion and fear and anxiety. Two weeks ago you managed to keep fear out of the driver's seat.

Let me illustrate with a story. Before Circle of Mercy was formed, Nancy served as interim pastor of Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church, a small congregation in Clyde, where we lived. I remember one Wednesday evening potluck dinner. That little church was having trouble meeting its own tiny budget. Hard decisions had to be made.

Among those present that night was a teacher at Haywood County's alternative high school, which met next door in an old bank building. Central High School is the school for students with behavioral problems. Years before, Sweet Fellowship had developed a mentoring relationship with Central High students, and several school classes were held in the church's basement.

The teacher who served as liaison between the church and the school would visit us from time to time. As it happened, he was there that night and witnessed the hard discussion. At the end of the meeting, he turned to me and said in a low voice, “It’s amazing, the way these folk can wrestle with difficult questions without cannibalizing each other.”

That, my friends, is one of the ways we live out our “peace church” confession. A lot of people in this room have been through church-based cannibal experiences. But at the heart of this congregation’s vision is the refusal, even in the midst of difficult and anxious discussions, to cannibalize each other.

That form of nonviolent living is among the most common occasions we have to practice our faith. We are to be a demonstration plot for the coming Commonwealth of God. If we are to be effective witnesses in the larger world, we must practice such faith in the commonwealth of this congregation.

Don’t get me wrong—I still think we need to continue conversation about how to marshal the needed resources, both time and money, for our children’s faith development. And, sure, I’d love a raise. But those are questions for another time.

For the time being, pay attention to every king, and every would-be king. They’re all scared and more than willing to steal our stories and rituals. And keep your eyes out for those magi. They’re liable to show up in the most unexpected places and unusual times, bearing wondrous and extravagant gifts.

Amen

*Quotes:*

Every political actor bent on ruling knows that epiphanies must be appropriated and domesticated for partisan use if order and stability are to be maintained.

Spiritual growth occurs when our idealism gets clobbered by facts-on-the-ground reality.