

Beyond the Roar
Matthew 2:1-12
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January 4, 2015

Cairo, Egypt, which sits between two deserts, is, as you might imagine, dusty in a variety of ways. Housing is also very inexpensive by western standards, so the apartment I shared with a gal from South Africa not only had two bedrooms, but also had two living rooms, a dining room, kitchen and one and a half baths. As was common among westerners, we hired local women to clean once a week. Because of the practices of the Egyptian culture, I use the word ‘hired’ with some hesitation. The women were wives of men referred to as “boabs.” Every apartment building has a boab, who does the maintenance and security for the building. The boab lives with his family in some kind of haphazardly put together shack on the ground beside the building. Our boabs were two brothers who cared for our building and one across the street. They, their wives and 6 children lived in a shack made of assorted construction materials including corrugated tin, cinder blocks, and even canvass. Although we wanted to hire their wives and, indeed, they wanted to work for pay, the cultural norms required a kind of dance around this agreement. The women would come and do the work, but at first refuse to be paid. So, I would hold out the Egyptian pounds and they would wave their hands at it saying “la, la” (no, no). I would insist; they would refuse. On about the third or fourth insistence they take the money, profusely say thank you, and leave. It’s a cultural thing.

The ‘cleaning’ consisted of taking all the throw-rugs out on the balconies and beating them. Dust and sand flew everywhere in the dry climate – including back into the rooms. They would wipe down the floors with damp cloths, beat the seat cushions and rugs some more and prepare to leave. It was, in essence, what my Mom used to call “rearranging the dust.” The dust was picked up, but within hours simply settled back where it had been not really much different for having been disturbed.

Our text this morning is a story told only in Matthew. The author tells of men he calls, “Magi” who lived to the east of Palestine perhaps in Arabia. In their study of the night sky, they saw an unusual star. They were not Jews, but believed that this star indicated that a new king had been born to the Jews. So, they set aside their lives and pack up bag and baggage. After an arduous journey, they arrived in Jerusalem. Naturally, they went to the palace, to the king to ask him about this birth, which might be his son and heir. In the process, of course, they unknowingly informed King Herod, who, though an Indumean, not a Jew, was the local king, that he had competition. When re-directed to Bethlehem these “wise men” went, found a toddler, gave him expensive rare gifts, and returned home. The story tells us nothing about their motivation; nothing about why they went; nothing about what a Jewish king could have meant to them for they were and, as far as we know, remained pagans. The text tells us nothing about the reaction of Mary or Jesus who are barely present in the story. We are told only that they found Jesus with his mother. Joseph is not even mentioned.

Many of us love this story because we incorporate it into our Christmas celebration even though the setting is actually some time a year or two later. Partly because of European Renaissance art, we have come to think of the Magi as three kings. That, though, is a distortion. Matthew actually does not tell us how many visitors there were. Additionally the Greek word he uses to describe them (*Magoi*) refers to ones who were astrologers or magicians. As is the case with much of scripture, we do not know whether or not this was a historical event. Some

historians have looked for evidence of such an unusual star, but in the story, the star is plainly meant to be a supernatural event. It stands still while the Magi ask directions in Jerusalem and again over Jesus' home in Bethlehem. Clearly Matthew includes this story to make some points about who Jesus was and how his birth was received.

One of those points is that Jesus has come not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. Remember that Matthew is writing long after the resurrection when the church included both Jewish and Gentile Christians. Another message in our text is that the birth of Jesus was a supernatural event which even the heavens marked. The star connects Jesus to the creation. A third message is that God has a tendency to startle folks out of their complacency. In this story, Herod and the Jewish religious authorities were disturbed because they have been put on notice that their power is threatened. They were comfortable as the ruling powers in what they thought was the center of power, Jerusalem. All of a sudden with these visitors from the East they are startled out of their complacency and put on notice that God is raising up a new power in Bethlehem, the peasant town nine miles down the road.

One of the things God does consistently and well is stir the pot of complacency in all of our lives. We will never find God in the same-old, same-old. If the world was perfect and all humans were living in peace, equality, and love, God certainly might leave well enough alone, but we all know that that is not the world we live in. God foments change because the world is not yet what God wants it to be. The only way God will get change is to shake us humans out of our contentment.

So, how has God shaken you recently – or even in the past year or two? What were those moments when you were startled to a new attention or a new perspective or to a new direction in your life? All manner of experiences and events can have that effect on us, at least in the short-term. Sometimes what shakes us up is a tragedy or crisis – personal or communal – which seems to pull us up short and send us deep into our souls wondering about our priorities or our path in life or what we have not done that we should be doing. Now, let us be perfectly clear: I am not saying that God causes tragedies. What I am saying is that God uses such events to shake folks into new awareness or new action. When the horrible shooting at the Sandy Hook school happened, families who lost little ones were devastated. Yet, many of them become driven advocates for gun-control; others have taken a new interest in the care of the mentally ill. That is a pattern we see over and over with the larger tragedies in life – the Spirit working in the horrors of life to awaken folks to a new direction or cause or even a new love. Sometimes the crisis which shakes us is more personal - a heart attack or an accident or suddenly realizing that we are getting old. At such times the Spirit is especially active calling us to take a new path or to change an old habit or to get moving or to forgive another or to rekindle an old relationship we have neglected for far too long.

Often, though, God's stirring the pot does not revolve around times of tragedy or pain and suffering. Many, many folks have gone on Appalachian Service Project (ASP) with this congregation over the last ten years. Practically to a person, volunteers come back proclaiming that the experience was 'life changing.' Although different mission trips to different places bring different experiences, often folks who go on church mission trips arrive home feeling that they,

their lives, their priorities or even their life paths have been permanently impacted by the experience.

Sometimes the sense of being startled into a new awareness is more individual. Some of you have read the book *The Flamboya Tree*, which Kelly Brest Van Kempen has been handing out over the past year. The true story is written by a Dutch woman who spent 4 years in a Japanese concentration camp in Indonesia as a child during World War II (as did Kelly's husband, Gus). The author tells of being a child of about 5 years living in a corner of a garage with her mother and two brothers, the younger one just an infant when they entered. They received ever declining rations of rice – a few spoonfuls a day – as their only food – were ill with dysentery and head lice and often forced to stand in formation in the Indonesian sun for hours on end. The ravages of severe malnutrition were common. There was no water for bathing and little to drink. Their mother's job in the camp was to go down in the sewer and clear it when sewage – human waste – clogged it (no water to bathe afterward). What I tell you here only skims the surface of the horror. As I read, I found myself suddenly aware of my own petty complaints such as being chronically annoyed that the woman who parks next to me in the parking garage parks close to the line and makes it harder for me to get in and out. I was suddenly also reminded that living in such misery and squalor is the lot of many human beings to this day in refugee camps in Lebanon and Turkey and Africa, and that many more who flee after earthquakes or other disasters end up living in deprivation and misery for years on end. I remembered the story of a Syrian family whose infant daughter froze to death in their tent in one of the refugee camps last winter. They did not forget her or leave her outside. They simply could not get her little body warm enough to keep her alive. I find myself startled into awareness of my own privilege and sense of entitlement, which allows me to grouse about that which is truly minor.

In the last two months, after Grand Juries refused to indict two cops who had killed black men under questionable circumstances, many folks including folks like us took to the streets in outrage. “Black lives matter” was an often seen slogan (yes, they do). Scenes, especially scenes of violence and arson reminded me of the summers of 1967 and 1968 when outrage also spilled over – as it did after the Rodney King beating and has at other times. Now, society *has* made progress since the 1960s – we have an African American president, a larger African American middle class and growing numbers of minorities in colleges, the professions, and in the halls of power. Much has changed, but much has stayed the same for too long.

With all of these circumstances when God pokes us into re-thinking and questioning our priorities, our attitudes, our values, and our role in society, we are unsettled in the moment. That is true whether the experience is basically positive (like ASP) or negative such as a tragedy or rooted in outrage as was the case for the demonstrators. But, does it last? Do all those mission trips truly change people's lives 5 years, 10 years down the road? Has ASP truly changed your life beyond that it was an amazing experience? Often in churches we find folks who become almost mission trip junkies driven to have that experience, that high, over and over. Some do become advocates for that particular area or country, which is a good thing. Does it, though, truly change your life – how you live; what you value; how you vote; what you do with your time and your money?

Although society continues to make progress on race relations, I wonder how many of those protestors will really stick with that justice issue to make an actual difference. Getting out in a crowd, carrying signs, shouting, provoking the police, talking to TV cameras, and being part of the gang, is one thing. That is the high, the drug – the “I feel good about myself because I’m standing up for justice” piece. That is the reaction of one stirred out of complacency, but will it last? Really changing an unjust system is hard work – work away from the crowd and the cameras. It is not glamorous work and often is thankless. Sometimes it involves boring scutt work – phone calls, paper work, handing out leaflets, going to interminable meetings.

Ditto for my reaction to the book *The Flamboya Tree*. The book shook me. It woke me up to the pettiness and privilege of my life, but will I stay awake long enough to truly change what I do, what I care about, how I vote or spend my money or use my volunteer time? Or, will I fall back to sleep?

We are all startled by God in myriad ways, but too often I fear our reaction is like that dust in Cairo – we fly up hyper alert, but all too quickly settle back just where we were before and little to nothing has changed. Not one of us is unaware of those times when God prods us out of our complacency. We tend to think a lot about what has happened. We tell ourselves and often others that this has really had an impact on us or that that has been ‘life changing.’ When we are startled by God, when we fall to telling ourselves that this is a seminal moment or event in our lives, then we need to ask how we will change and what will be different in 5 years. The prod comes from God, but the change will not happen without intention on our part. Without intentional action on our part, we are the dust and will soon settle again. If we are real in receiving God’s prod, if we are really awakened, then we will take action. We will give up some of what we have or we will think of our money differently and change how we spend it or we will vote in a new way or we will run for office ourselves or change careers or become activists. Whatever we do, when we look back in 5 or 10 years, we will see that that moment or experience truly was a turning point in our lives. If we do nothing, we will be like the old lion at the Cairo zoo. That poor old lion would just lie dozing in his cage looking bored. When a crowd gathered, a zookeeper would come along and prod the lion with a stick. The animal would stand, give a good roar or two or three. Then as the satisfied crowd drifted away, the lion would lie down again in the same spot, in the same position, and doze off again.

If we don’t move from outrage to action, if we stay stuck in the euphoria of the ASP trip, if we look at the pictures of suffering and simply ‘feel bad,’ we are the worst kind of hypocrites – all talk offering false hope of change to the desperate while we actually cling to our privilege and position. Herod and the people of Jerusalem were startled by the news that God had provided a new king because it threatened their power and privilege and position. Their fear-filled response was to try to thwart God’s will and destroy God’s plan. We are not the new Herods. We do not try to thwart God’s will, but we do end up time after time trying to protect our privilege in the face of God’s call to step out in faith. When God next startles you out of your complacency, will you merely stand up and roar a few times before settling back in? Or, will you truly respond to the call in a way that you can look back in 5 years or 10 and say, “that truly was a life-changing moment”?