

They Left For Their Own Country by another Road

January 4, 2009 Second Sunday after Christmas

Lectionary citations

The readings for Epiphany may be used:
Isaiah 60:1-6 with Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

I have not been on many mission trips. As I review my past, I can remember helping to build a house outside Oklahoma City, cleaning up after a tornado in Caruthersville, cleaning up after a tornado and painting the inside of a house in Canton, MO, painting the outside of a house in St. Louis, and cutting up some downed tree limbs in the south side of Cape Girardeau. Therefore, I am very excited and a little nervous about representing our congregation on the Jamaican Christian Medical Mission this spring. This mission involves traveling a long distance and requires a great deal of preparation. I have had to get a full set of immunizations and am not looking forward to having to carefully select what I am taking. My idea of packing for a trip usually involves dumping all the clean clothes in the dryer into my roll bag and ending up with too few socks and too much underwear.

When I first began attending the meetings of the medical mission team, I had no plans to go on the mission. After all, I have no medical training and experience. I am good at heavy lifting, but I assumed they would have plenty of other strong backs. I was surprised to learn that they were happy to have another Pastor come along. In fact, there were some specific tasks they already had in mind for me! I learned that the mission requires a variety of skills and even some of mine were needed. I may even be required to preach a sermon while I am there!

Although most churches support mission trips, including overseas mission trips, they are not without controversy. I have heard them referred to as "mission vacations." Perhaps the most valid criticism of traveling long distances to help those in need is the observation that there are plenty of folks in need just a few blocks away. One of the things we do in Jamaica is to provide basic dental care. I know that there are people here in our region that desperately need the same basic dental care. For almost every need that is met through mission overseas—housing, food, water, medical care—there are unmet needs just as severe in our own neighborhood. Quite sincere Christians have asked me, about why we are helping people in Jamaica when there are plenty of people who need help in Cape Girardeau. However, I don't want to debate the merits of distant versus local mission. I do think there are compelling reasons for Christians to leave their home communities to do mission work. I believe that today's Gospel can help us understand why we are supporting the Jamaican Christian Medical Mission.

As I studied today's Gospel reading, I realized that the magi were engaging in an overseas mission trip. In fact, the parallels are amazing. The magi are group of experts—the scientists of their day—who are traveling a great distance from their home country of Persia to Bethlehem. Like our mission trips today, they must have engaged in a great deal of planning and preparation to travel successfully such a great distance. The magi's destination is the spiritual “hot spot” of their day. Many people outside of Israel believed that a messiah, a savior would come from the Jews. This Son of God would bring peace not only to the Jews but also to the entire world. The magi were using their technical knowledge of scripture and astrology to take them to the crucial spiritual destination of their time.

In the same way, missions from the developed world, the United States, to the developing world—Africa, South America, Asia, and the Caribbean are a kind of spiritual “hot spot” in today's world. Most experts believe that in a very short time, the developing world will have the majority of Christians and these Christians will assume a greater and greater degree of Church leadership in the future. If we want to build a truly universal Church, we need to understand and get experience working with Christians in the poorer half of the world. The unity of the church also required that they understand and know us in person, not only from what they see on television. The developing world is “where the action is” for Church growth and is the place where the Church has the best chance of having a major impact on peoples' lives. Why would we want to stand by and miss that action, any more than the magi would have been content to stay at home studying their star charts when a messiah was being born in Bethlehem?

When the magi arrived in Palestine, they had to consult with King Herod to find out exactly the messiah was supposed to be born. Herod called together the religious authorities of the day, the priests, and scribes. The magi also have to consult with the local religious authorities, just as our Jamaican group works closely with the church at Carron Hall.

In the same way, even the most spiritual mission trips involve passports, visas and work permits. Just like in the Bible stories, those authorities can sometimes seem to welcome mission groups, while actually pursuing their own political and personal agendas. Again, the local church welcomes the mission, but wants to make sure that it is not disruptive of its own programs. We have been asked to bring no more than 30 people because more would strain the resources of the local church—after all, they have to find places for us to sleep and keep an eye on us to make sure that we stay safe during our visit.

The folks in Jamaica, unlike King Herod, sincerely welcome our mission group. However, just as Herod felt that the mission of the magi—to find the new messiah—threatened his kingship, mission trips can be burdensome and disruptive for local governmental and religious authorities. This is especially the case when the mission groups, unlike our group, are ignorant of local conditions and sensitivities. However, regardless of the skills and intentions of the mission group, they are bringing change to the communities they come to serve. As we all know, change can be good, but it can also be frightening.

The magi, bring three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts are so valuable, it has been imagined that the magi were kings, although they are never given this title in the Bible. These gifts were ridiculously valuable as gifts to the child of a carpenter. Even one of them exceeded what Joseph could have earned in a lifetime. In the same way, the gifts of medicine, medical equipment, and skilled care exceed anything the folks at Carron Hall in Jamaica could ever afford. Like the magi we are bringing as much as we can, thanks to the support that you have given us through participating in fund raisers like the dinner dance auction and by rolling dumplings.

Commentators say that the gifts of the magi are so important because they show that the magi knew who Jesus was. Because he was a king, the prince of peace, they brought him kingly gifts. Their gifts were a statement of their respect. When we go to Jamaica, we take the best equipment and medicines we can afford to collect and ship. In the past, some groups have taken outdated and expired medicines on medical missions. This practice is no longer acceptable. What we give should be a reflection of our love for our brothers and sisters in Jamaica and a reflection of our respect for them as fellow Christians and human beings. Although we will not be serving in “state of the art” facilities, we will be doing our best to give them the best care we can under the circumstances. We love and respect the people who we are going to serve and our gifts to them show this.

The trip the magi made and the gifts they brought were important because they were a public declaration of who Jesus was. Epiphany gives notice to those who Paul called “the rulers and authorities” that the Son of God was born in Bethlehem and that everything would be different from now on. This public declaration, from the mouths of the magi, foreigners and strangers, put everyone on notice that the messiah had come and that nothing would ever be the same. The reaction of King Herod, violence and murder, was predictable, but could not stop what God had started. In the same way, our mission work shows that there is one world and one Church and that whether we want to believe it or not, the congregation at Carron Hall Church in Jamaica and our congregation are part of the same living Body of Christ.

The trip to Bethlehem changed the magi. Their visit with Herod—the false king of the Jews—and declaring to him that the real king of the Jews had been born, was honest, yet naive. The consequences of the magi’s public declaration of the messiah are horrifying: “Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.” Herod the butcher strikes out against the messiah by killing all boys in Bethlehem aged two or younger. Yet the magi have learned about how the world really works and that learning is reflected in their actions: “And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”

The places we go to in our mission trips represent the way the majority of the world lives. To live and work in that world, even if for a short time, has a profound impact on everyone who goes and does mission work. It is not that we are made into instant experts on international economics and foreign policy. Nevertheless, our appreciation and understanding of how most people live is deepened in a way that cannot be accomplished by mission work in our own communities. In local mission work, we are dealing with the small share of the U.S. Population who is severely in need. In foreign mission work, we

are helping needy people who make up the majority of their societies. We need to reach out to both kinds of people, but we also need to learn about their differences as well as their similarities.

Finally, there was something important about the magi, these gentile foreigners, coming to witness to the messiah. The fact that they were strangers, traveling a great distance from a strange land, gave their witness a deeper meaning both for the Jews, the Persians, and for us today. In the same way, for people from Cape Girardeau to travel to Jamaica to build relationships and serve tells both the people of Jamaica and the people of Cape Girardeau something about what it means to be a Christian. When we travel to Jamaica, we are witnessing to the same Gospel that we hear every Sunday from our church pulpits and read during the week in our Bibles. However, when we see that power of the Gospel to carry people, including ourselves, to a strange land to serve Christ by serving others, we all benefit from the power of that witness.

At a meeting of the Missouri Mid South Conference of the UCC, I met a Jamaican pastor now serving a small church in Missouri. Amazingly, he had started his career serving at Carron Hall! As the church in the developing world continues to grow, those churches are sending out overseas missions of their own. When a team of Jamaican missionaries comes to Cape Girardeau to serve us as we have served them, I think we will benefit from their witness just as much as they will from ours. Mission is one of the ways in which the Church teaches us that we all, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, American and Jamaican, "have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Amen

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