

Epiphany 2013 C

Isaiah 60:1–6/Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14/Ephesians 3:1–12/Matthew 2:1–12

The Holy, Unfamiliar Stimulus of God

Some creatures in this world can only respond to unfamiliar *stimuli* in one way. Touch certain species of sea urchins in their soft center, and watch them instinctively fold into themselves. Threaten an *armadillidium vulgare* (more commonly known as a “roly poly” or pill bug) and it will roll into a ball. Humans are not so predictable. When exposed to unfamiliar *stimuli*, the way we respond depends on the way we define the situation. In Matthew’s account of people’s responses to the birth of Jesus, the reactions run the gamut.

When a group of Persian pagans (a.k.a. “wise men”) suddenly show up in Jerusalem out of the blue and enquire about the whereabouts of the “child who has been born the king of the Jews.” (Mt. 2:1) King Herod does not respond well to the unexpected news. Herod was half-Jewish, half-Idumaeen. His family ruled in Palestine from 55 B.C.E. until the end of the first century. This Herod, the only one of the Herods with the title “king,” was a man of curious contradictions. Herod had his good side. Known as “Herod the Great” he completed many impressive building projects. He was the only ruler in Palestine who was able to maintain peace and order amid the chaos of the region. Herod could also be generous. When taxes became burdensome, he remitted them so the people wouldn’t suffer. During the famine of 25 B.C.E., Herod even melted down his private gold plate and used the proceeds to buy corn for the poor.¹

But Herod had a sinister side. When he realized his death was imminent, Herod withdrew to Jericho. Then he gave an executive order to arrest of the most influential, distinguished citizens of Jerusalem on trumped-up charges, threw

¹ William Barclay. *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956.

them into prison, and had them executed the moment he died. Jewish historian Josephus reported that Herod killed his wife, her mother, and even three of his own children. Emperor Augustus commented that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. No wonder "all of Jerusalem" trembled in fear as its citizens awaited Herod's reaction to the news of a newborn king in Jerusalem. Not unexpectedly, Herod reacted to the unexpected stimulus of God's grace with conniving, murderous hostility and fear. Herod was afraid of anything that would interrupt or interfere with his life.²

Fear is one of the most powerful forces in the world. Parker Palmer believes there is a "sequence of fears" that exercise a great deal of control over us.³ The first fear is the fear of diversity. We worry about things and people that are unlike ourselves. If we manage to deal with this fear, then we must deal with the next level of fear: our fear of conflict. At the heart of this fear of conflict is the fear that we will lose identity. Whatever it is that constitutes our "identity," and however we have come to understand the way certain people, places and things to be components of our identity, we will fight tooth and nail to preserve identity. What happens when our identity is threatened? Parker identifies a fourth fear: the fear that a direct, live encounter with otherness will challenge us or cause us to change our lives. All four levels are running amok in King Herod. His many-layered fears that "frighten" him and his extreme reaction to Jesus may be light years away from us, and Herod has all the marks of a sociopath. Who can relate to someone like that? It may come as a surprise, but we have something in common with Herod. We may not have Herod's degree of power, his fragile ego,

² William Barclay, *op. cit.*, 21.

³ Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. Quoted in John S. McClure. *New Proclamation Commentary, 2003-2004*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 73.

or his homicidal tendencies, but there is within us all a capacity to fear. And we do show, by our thoughts, words, and deed, that we also know what it is like to fear the extent to which Jesus might impact our lives, challenge us and change us.

On the other end of the spectrum are wise pagans from Persia. Despite the somewhat romantic, non-biblical legends that have accumulated about the *magi*—that there were three of them; that they were kings; that they had names (Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior,) their identities are shrouded with mystery. What can be said about the *magi* is this: they were non-Jewish pagans who were familiar with astrology and the interpretation of dreams. Their mysterious identities may be tantalizing, but what makes them remarkable is their response to Jesus. Simply put, God called; they responded. They may have been pagan; they did not live anywhere near Jerusalem, and they knew nothing about Jewish scripture or the God of Abraham, Sarah, Moses and the prophets, but they used the spiritual tools at their disposal and followed the star. In their world, people’s destiny was determined by the star under which they were born. The *magi* thought a star might be a *fravashi*—a “counterpart or angel—of a great person.”⁴ When an unusual and unusually brilliant star appeared, they perceived it to be a rare phenomenon; an unfamiliar *stimulus*. William Barclay said, “We cannot tell what the Magi saw; but it was their profession to watch the heavens, and some heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world.”⁵ Their pagan mythology got them halfway to Jesus; they would need Scriptures and the interpretive aid of Jewish religious leaders in order to reach their destiny. How wonderfully ironic, the way God uses insiders and outsiders for God’s purposes.

⁴ George Buttrick, *Interpreter’s Bible: Matthew, Vol. 7*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 258-259. Buttrick quotes Sherman E. Johnson’s exegesis on this text.

⁵ William Barclay, *op. cit.*, 17.

Dan Clendenin observes that it is the *magi* who 'unveil' the mystery and nature of God's realm, announced and made manifest in Jesus.⁶ Once the *magi* arrive, they do what God wants most from us: they worship. As George Buttrick says so simply yet profoundly, "The wise men found God—and themselves—when they worshipped."⁷ They discovered God on God's own terms.⁸ The *magi* respond to the holy, unfamiliar stimulus of God with faith, not fear. They are receptive, not resistant.

Today is Epiphany—the season in the church year where we focus on the light of Christ; the season we focus upon enlightenment. If we are receptive to Christ spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, we will be changed. How, we do not know. If the journey of the *magi* is any indication of what may be in store for us, we will not leave this season empty-handed; we will, if we are open to it, be changed by Jesus Christ himself—that holy, unfamiliar stimulus from God

⁶ Daniel Clendenin. *Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself*. Pagan Magi and Power Politics: The "Disclosure" of Epiphany - For Sunday January 6, 2008 Epiphany Essay posted 31 December 2007. <http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20071231JJ.shtml>. Accessed January 1, 2013.

⁷ George Buttrick, *Interpreter's Bible*, 257.

⁸ Brian Stoffregen, *op. cit.*