

“Star Trek”

Matthew 2: 1-12

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It was way back in 1966 that a television program made its debut. The setting for this program was not planet earth, but the outer reaches of space and, more specifically, “the Starship Enterprise.” The crew members would, in time, become regular members of our cultural family. There was Captain Kirk, a man of power and action. There was Spock, the Vulcan who refused to allow his decisions to be affected by emotion or feeling. And then, there was McCoy, the compassionate doctor who often found himself at odds with Spock’s emotionless intellect.

Along with the other members of the Enterprise crew, this trio explored the unknown regions of space, “**boldly going where no one has gone before.**” Each episode brought a new encounter, a new challenge and often, a new discovery. A friend of mine once suggested to me that each episode was nothing other than a morality play, inviting the viewer to share in the moral struggle or dilemma that the crew faced.

Their trek was hardly a crusade, but instead, a quest for new understanding and insight about various regions and cultures of the universe. The crew of the Enterprise, you may recall, was commissioned not to interfere with other cultures, but to simply learn what each of them had to teach.

It’s rather amazing to think that now, over fifty years later, this story line still captivates so many. How many of you would identify yourself as a “Trekie?” While it is not easy to pinpoint the exact reason for this fascination, I suspect that, at its core, the Star Trek story plays upon a quest that we can all identify with—the quest for understanding, illumination and hope in the midst of a world often darkened by fear, confusion and hatred.

In our lesson from the Gospel of Matthew, this morning, we encounter what might be termed, “the original star trek saga.” The Magi who came from the East (Persia perhaps) were on a “star trek” of their own. In following the star, they were seeking hope in the midst of a world consumed by fear and evil. Their journey led them to Jerusalem, where they stopped to ask King Herod if he happened to know the whereabouts of the “child who has been born King of the Jews?”

To be sure, it was a question that got Herod’s full and undivided attention. He had not become king, after all, by lightly dismissing such inquiry. No, he had become King precisely

because of his suspicion and fear of anyone or anything that might be a threat to his rule—even a poor, defenseless little baby.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel notes that when Herod heard of their inquiry, **“he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him.”**

Now, I don't know if it occurred to you, but what we have here is nothing less than the basic elements for the plot of a rather intriguing first century morality play.

On the one hand, we have the curious Magi who come from the east, following the star in their quest to learn more about this child who would bring hope to their world.

On the other hand, we have the entrenched king who suspicious and afraid of any possible threat to his rule and his power.

Interestingly enough, however, the plot is not resolved in the telling of this story. After consulting with the priests and scribes, Herod informs the Magi that Bethlehem is the likely location. He then asks that they bring word to him if they find the child so that he might, likewise, go and pay homage to him.

They then go on their way, find the child and pay homage to him. But Matthew tells us that being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they go home by another road. Our story (episode) then comes to an end without any real resolution.

Yet, the table has been set. The primary antagonists have been identified and the outline of the developing plot (morality play) begins to take shape.

The writer of Matthew's Gospel is making a rather bold and surprising statement.

The writer is suggesting that the “Good News” of God's unfolding plan of salvation was brought to the attention of the world by those who would be least expected to be cast in that role.

That announcement would be made initially by shepherds from the fields outside of Bethlehem—those who clung to the lowest rung on the social ladder and the Magi—foreigners from the East who actually practiced a different religion. These would hardly be the characters that any good, self-respecting Jew would anticipate as announcing the birth of the Messiah. But there you have it in Matthew's Gospel. Those on the outside play a vital role in God's unfolding plan of salvation.

On the other hand, those on the inside—the King and the scribes and priests of the religious establishment—were relegated to the outside, trembling in fear over what this news might mean for them and the power that they had once wielded.

To be sure, it was this developing plot between insider and outsider that would characterize so much of the eventual ministry of the baby who grew to be a man. To the chagrin of Herod and those who shared in his power and privilege, Jesus would remind his listeners that the embrace of God is so much bigger than they were prepared to accept. The

old ground rules, the old divisions, the previous limits of one's acceptability were no longer valid. God's love, Jesus declared, was big enough to include tax collectors and prostitutes, foreigners and any other outcast that could possibly be named.

Although it is easily and often overlooked, this quaint little story from the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel is hardly quaint and it is hardly cute. Instead, it portrays a radical new understanding of the way in which God is actually at work in our world—from the outside in.

As it turned out, Herod had every right and every reason to be afraid. You see, the child that was born—the child that he would have gladly killed had he the chance—would, in fact, initiate a kingdom that was the antithesis of Herod's kingdom, a kingdom of love, mercy, justice, acceptance and grace.

The plot of this story that we find in Matthew's Gospel, is, of course, not unfamiliar to any one of us. It is a plot that is still being played out in the day to day drama of our own lives. There are those, of course, who would play the part of Herod, those who would seek to preserve their power and their privilege at all costs. And in their fear, they would decree who is acceptable and who is not, who is "in" and who is "out."

Yet, as this story would remind us, our God will not be limited by the dictates of power, privilege and prominence. No, our God has this persistent way of using those who are least expected and often, least accepted, as lead characters in God's unfolding plan of salvation.

Like the Magi and like the cast of Star Trek, we find ourselves in this brand new year of 2018, on a quest—following a star, looking for signs of hope in the midst of a world that is so often enshrouded in the darkness of fear.

Like the crew members of the Enterprise, we are seeking the light of understanding that allows our world to live together in peace and harmony. In that pursuit, let us indeed, "boldly go where no one has gone before."

I trust that, as we do so, we will take heart and hope in the knowledge that God is, even now, at work in unexpected ways in unexpected people, bringing about unexpected results. While it may sometimes appear that Herod has the upper hand, it is essential for us to remember that Herod is absolutely powerless in the face of the love that was made flesh in a child who was born as King of the Jews.

Amen.