

January 10, 2016

The Christmas Questions

Where is the Child?

Matthew 2:1-16

Opening words: Our world values answers; I believe in questions. So did the famous French enlightenment writer Voltaire. He once wrote, "*Judge a man by his questions rather than his answers.*" A good question is priceless because it simply means you want to understand. Good questions are the key to understanding our world; good questions are the key to understanding our faith. I believe God expects us to ask questions because God wants us to understand His mysterious ways. My 2015 Advent/Christmas sermon series revolves around some of the finest questions ever asked. I have called this sermon series, *The Christmas Questions*.

We began on Thanksgiving weekend with Zechariah's question of doubt, *How can I be sure?* Then, we looked at Mary's question of humility, *How can this be?* Next, we looked at Elizabeth's question of resilience, *Why am I so favored?* Next came the crowd's question of potential, *What will this child become?* On Christmas Eve we looked at the key question, *What child is this?* Today we look at the traditional scripture for Epiphany, Matthew 2:1-16. Their question was a question of location, *Where is the child?*

Matthew 2:1-16 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and

myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." 16 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

One of the great preachers of our time was a man by the name of Fred Craddock. Several months ago he left us. He taught Homiletics at the Chandler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. No one has influenced my preaching more than he. The reason is simple. No one can tell a story like Fred Craddock. Let me give you one example.

Craddock told the story about going back to his hometown in rural north Georgia. He decided to eat breakfast at a café run by one of the members of his church. It was a restaurant in what's called a "shotgun house" – a long slender house with a door at each end. In this case, one door opened onto the front street. The other door, the back door, opened onto the alley. The owner of the restaurant was a man by the name of George. When Fred walked in, George looked at Fred and said, "Let's go for a cup of coffee." Craddock was surprised. "You don't have coffee?" But George insisted. They went to a nearby fast food restaurant and sat down with their drinks. "You know the curtain?" George asked. "Yes," said Craddock. The curtain George referred to was stretched out across the middle of his café, between the two doors of the shotgun house. It was there to segregate. White folks entered the restaurant by the front door from the main street, black folks entered from the alley. "The curtain's got to come down," said George. "Then take it down," said Craddock. "But if I take it down there's a lot of folks who won't like it," said George. "Then leave it up," said Craddock. "If I take it down I may lose my business," said George. "But if I leave it up, I lose my soul." Sometimes the world can be an ugly place.

What would you do? Would you take the curtain down or would you leave the curtain up? It is not just a story about a restaurant owner in northern Georgia. It is our story. Daily, each one of us must decide. Are we going to stand up against the things that are just plain wrong and lose something in this world? Or are we going to ignore those issues and lose your part of our soul? That is a question each one of us must answer. Do you take the curtain down or do you leave it up?

It even happens when you read the scriptures. We ignore and accept certain things. For example, look at the text for today. The main characters in the story are the Magi. You

know them because you know the hymn, *We Three Kings*. Sometimes they are called Wise Men. The truth is, the song and tradition have taught us more about them than the Bible. However, today I am only interested in what the Bible says. What does the Bible say? The Bible says they came from the east during the time of King Herod. They came because they had seen a star that signaled the birth of the King of the Jews. They went to the palace because they assumed a king would be born in a palace. However, their assumption was wrong. While their astrological skills were excellent, their Biblical knowledge is limited. The only thing they really accomplished that day was to incite the insecure King Herod. This is Bible. Jesus was two years old when they finally saw Jesus. They left him some expensive gifts, odd gifts for a baby. By then Joseph and Mary had left the manger and were living in a house. In a dream, the Magi were told to return home by another route, by passing Herod in Jerusalem. In a dream, Joseph was told to move his tiny family to Egypt in order to keep Jesus safe. King Herod's opportunity to kill this new born King of the Jews was gone and he reacts in a violent way. Verse 16 says, *"When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi."* I find that to be one of the most disturbing verses in the Bible. What started out as such a good thing, worshiping Jesus, ended in a horrible way, the death of baby boys.

Maybe that is why we keep the curtain up? We try to avoid tension; we try to avoid conflict. We try to avoid anything that is ugly because those things are upsetting. We want every situation to be a win-win situation. However, sometimes people lose. The Magi fit nicely into your nativity set, but there is never any room for dead baby boys. Could it be we have edited the Bible to make it agreeable to our senses? That is one of the things that disturbs me about our generation's relationship with the Bible. We have distilled Bible stories down to cartoon figures and have sucked the life out of each scene. The Bible was written by adults, for adults.

Could it be we have edited the world to make it agreeable to our senses? We keep the curtain up, so to speak, because it hides the truth. Every situation in our world is not a win-win situation. Sometimes people lose, and the church is called upon to renounce such behavior. Some have called the church the conscience of society. Jesus expects us to take the curtain down, but there is a price to pay. What are you hiding behind the curtain? What ugly **world issues** are we hiding behind the curtain? What ugly **national issues** are we hiding behind the curtain? What ugly **personal issues** are we hiding behind the curtain? If you keep the curtain up you will make everyone happy! But if you keep the curtain up you will lose part of your soul. If you are ready to begin, say, **"Amen!"**

World Issues

We need to take down the curtain and look at world issues.

Several years ago, I found myself in the country of Belarus. It is located west of Russia and north of the Ukraine. Don't worry if you don't know Belarus's location. It is one of

those ugly places in the world. It is a country that has no real future because of her past. The future of that country ended on April 26, 1986. You remember the event, Chernobyl! Today, Chernobyl is abandoned. In 1986, it was part of the Soviet Union, located in northern Ukraine. On April 26 of that year there was a nuclear accident of catastrophic proportions. Radiation poured out of the plant. On that day the wind was blowing from the south. The radiation clouds blew over Belarus and devastated a large portion of the country. One-third of her land was suddenly gone. By the time I arrived the Soviet Union was gone and the country of Belarus was an independent state. It will be thousands of years before the radiation is gone. Until that happens Belarus has no real chance for progress. They are the poor neighbor in the world community. No one really helps her because no one really cares.

I will never forget the condition of the children when we arrived. They were pale, sick and cold. The radiation had suppressed their immune systems. They had no heat in the orphanage because there was no money to fix the boiler. I was always taught that America was different. I was taught that America was good and cared about the poor in our world. When I asked the question, how much money does America send to the country of Belarus? I was told, "Nothing"! Why? Because Belarus offers no political advantage to our country. Sick children were living in a 40 degree orphanage because they offered us no political advantage. That is just plain wrong. The story of Belarus does not stand alone. How many other world issues are hiding behind the curtain? It is time to take the curtain down. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

National Issues

We need to take down the curtain and look at national issues.

One of the finest people in this community is Kathleen Price. She is the founder and director of the Mission of Love. Our unit of United Methodist Women hosted her several years ago. She is an incredible person. This is the mission statement of her organization: *You are not here to save the world, but are to touch the hands that are within reach.* She has touched many hands through the years in many locations. She has helped people in Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Peru and the Pine Ridge Reservation. I knew of her work in parts of the Spanish-speaking world but I didn't know she helped Americans.

The Pine Ridge Reservation is located in the southeastern corner of South Dakota on the Nebraska border. It is the eighth largest Indian reservation in America, measuring nearly 3,500 square miles. That makes it larger than the states of Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Nearly 29,000 Americans live on the reservation today. Over the past 200 years, these people have lost nearly everything, including their language. The numbers are not pretty. Up to 85% of the people on the reservation live below the poverty level. Adolescent suicide is four times higher than the national average. If you are a man, then you can expect to live to the age of 47; if you are a woman you can expect to live until you are 52. Kathleen Price and the Mission of Love go to help these people. They go to Pine Ridge because their own government has basically turned their

back on these Americans because they are Native Americans. It is just easier to keep the curtain up. The story of the Pine Ridge Reservation does not stand alone. How many national issues are hiding behind the curtain? It is time to take the curtain down. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Personal Issues

We need to take down the curtain and look at personal issues.

Periodically, I am scheduled to go to the Mahoning Valley District Clergy meeting. It is an unusual group of people. Everyone seems to have a story to tell. Everyone seems to have an awkward situation that must be handled. I could give you countless examples but I will only give you one.

When we last got together someone asked me my advice. A retired couple had come to him. They had both been widowed and were tired of living alone. They wanted him to officiate at their marriage but there would be no marriage license. Why? The reason was simple. If she legally married the man then she would lose her deceased husband's generous pension. They wanted a pretend wedding so they wouldn't lose income. Do you know of anyone who is living together so they won't lose their deceased spouse's pension check? Do you know of senior citizens who live together unmarried for economic reasons? Do you know of anyone of any age that lives together? I don't want to shock you, but sometimes young people live together too. It is now an accepted practice.

Living together has become part of the landscape of our society. Everyone says, "The times have changed." I know times have changed. We are very high tech. We have cellular telephones, the internet and high definition televisions. However, living together is one of those things that is hiding behind the curtain. It is one of those things that is socially accepted, but it is still morally wrong. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ; you know better. You are supposed to be representing Jesus in this world. Do you think Jesus would have moved in with someone else? Living together does not stand alone. How many other personal issues are hiding behind the curtain? I have decided to take the curtain down. I hope you have too! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** Marriage not only protects individuals, but it protects society as well.

Do you remember what the Bible said? The Bible said the Magi came to worship the newborn king. Their hearts were in the right place, but they had two flaws in their plan. First, they came too late. According to verse 16 they came two years too late. Second, they went to the wrong place. The Magi went to the palace in Jerusalem. They should have gone to the house in Bethlehem. If you combine those two mistakes, then you discover one of the most disturbing verses in the Bible. The insecure King Herod ordered the killing of every two-year-old boy and younger. Does anyone's nativity set include dead baby boys? Of course not! It is easier just to ignore it. It is easier to keep it hidden behind the curtain. How many things do we hide behind the curtain? If that makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**