



Before God and Everybody

Psalm 72:8-17; Isaiah 60:1-3; Mt. 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:1-12

A levee collapsed in Nevada this weekend, flooding and killing and California. A stomach bug is spreading quickly around England. A slaughter in Kenya killed 30 believers attending church on New Year's Day. Assassination in Pakistan is creating chaos. Bad news travels quickly. It is not what we want to hear, yet we are seemingly drawn to bad news like flies to garbage. Where is the good news in all the reporting we hear? Will we take responsibility for sharing the best of news with a world longing for release from the despair of media headlines?

Seemingly, it was all a secret. Nobody seemed to know what had really happened in that Bethlehem stable. Well, a few were in on it, but the news did not make the front page headlines. After all, who would ever give the shepherds an ear? They were a no-account, motley crew, ritually impure, and didn't even make it to Sabbath celebrations at the synagogue. It is hard to picture Mary and Joseph proclaiming for all to hear that the new baby was God in the flesh. Who would have paid any attention to that?

No, the birth was a more hushed event. For Mary and Joseph, it was shrouded in shame, as it would be apparent that the child was born before their wedding. Luke writes of Jesus recognized by Simeon and Anna at the presentation in the Temple, but Matthew does not seem to have known that story. Maybe those who knew or thought they understood this baby to be Messiah just kept quiet for fear of Herod' or Rome's reaction. Whatever the reason, it was all seemingly hush hush.

Angels may have proclaimed the joyous news on the Judean hillside, but inside Jerusalem no celebration was to be found. God had become part and parcel of creation, taking the flesh of a newborn baby, yet no one seemed the wiser. It was the grandest secret, seemingly ignored by all.

Far, far away in a distant land, however, certain magi recognized some kind of sign. They understood through the appearance of some astrological phenomenon that a new king was born in Judah. They prepared for the journey, acquired and loaded their camels with the necessary goods for travel. We aren't told, but they probably arrived from Babylon some time after Jesus' birth. A trip of more than 500 miles would take a while. Preparations for the journey alone consumed more than a week.

These magi did not have to rely on following the course of the star they had seen. Rather, they read the heavenly sign to understand that a king had been born to the Jewish nation. They simply headed to Jerusalem, the obvious place to find the newly born king. After months of travel, they arrived as dignitaries in Jerusalem, seeking the child. They were not expecting this birth to be a well-guarded secret. Their arrival and questions caused a stir.

"Where is the one born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to pay homage to him." The people did not know how to respond. They knew nothing of such a birth. If this were Messiah being born, would they want to know anything of his birth? Would it not be dangerous for Messiah to show his face before he were ready to lead Israel in revolt against Rome?

The magi had no sense of secrecy. As far as they were concerned, the truth was painted in the heavens before God and everybody, for any and all to see. They were not worried with hiding the truth

of Jesus' birth. They were not concerned with issues of safety. They were concerned with coming to pay proper homage to the newborn king.

The magi were summoned to Herod. Wily, crafty, plotting, Herod sought to turn the events to his advantage. He had already killed one of his own sons who had become a threat to his position. Now Herod sought to eliminate this other threat the magi announced. He connived to turn them into spies as they departed to seek the new king in Bethlehem. Whomever they found and claimed as king he would execute to maintain the security of his position.

The magi ventured to Bethlehem, guided by God through the star. They arrived in excitement, looking for the child whose birth had brought them on such a long, difficult, and expensive journey. It is a wonder they had come at all.

They were not worshippers of *Yahweh*, God of Israel. They were most likely Zoroastrians, a group that understood reality as a battle between the God of Good and the God of Evil. They did not take *Yahweh* as Creator of all and the only true God. Even so, the secret news of Messiah's birth was an open book in their hands. God's message of redemption was given to these men who traveled a great distance to pay homage to the new king announced in the heavens.

To the Jews, Messiah's birth was still a secret. To these foreigners, the birth of Jesus as Messiah was an open book. It was a message of good news which they boldly proclaimed. They did not hide the announcement, but caused a stir in Jerusalem as they looked for the child born as king and announced in the heavens. They caused another stir in Bethlehem as they arrived before the child to offer their tribute and homage. They lay before him their precious gifts, signifying their recognition of Jesus' identity. They came, not to receive anything from this child king, but to offer their best to this one destined to rule nations.

Their gifts and coming signaled for all the world a willingness to let go of lesser things to pledge their lives in service to this new king. Pledging their allegiance and presenting their gifts, they left. Their journey was no secret. The purpose of their travel was not hidden. Their departure was in the light of day. They just did not bother with informing Herod the story of their success. That message they took back with them on their eastern return.

Those who should have recognized Messiah's birth ignored it. The scholars of Jerusalem were not bothered to seek Messiah in Bethlehem. The magi's news did not make much of an impression beyond that original stir. The good news of Messiah's coming was overlooked in the daily grind. The news of revolts in other places, tragedies, and disasters of daily living took over as the topics of daily discussion. The best news was forgotten, set aside, and leaving with the caravan back to the east.

Which role do we play in this story of the announcement of Messiah's coming? What do we do with the glorious message we claim to know and hold dear? How do we honor Christ as Lord of all nations? How does our worship and homage impact the community in which we live? What will we do this week to share the good news of Christ Jesus?

There are plenty of headlines out there to distract us and claim our attention. It is time high time we proclaim the good news before God and everybody.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*