



FLOSSMOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

“DISTURBING THE PEACE”

Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon preached by Fred Lyon
on January 1, 2012
First Sunday after Christmas

Joanne Harris' novel, *Chocolat*, describes the disruption of the bourgeois sensibilities of a rural French community when an exotic woman arrives to set up a chocolate shop, right in the middle of Lent. About this community, we are told that it “was a quiet little village in the French countryside whose people believed in tranquility. Tranquility. If you lived in this village, you understood what was expected of you. You knew your place in the scheme of things. And if you happened to forget, someone would help remind you.” Here, the narrator prepares us to encounter a place where peace is more about maintaining the status quo of local norms than seeking something on the higher order of God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven.

The gospel of Matthew describes the disruption of the status quo of Jerusalem, right in the middle of the pax Romana. For all the many great cultural achievements born of the pax Romana, the civilizing influence of ancient Rome involved establishing order through coercion and oppression. This was a peace where everyone knew their place in the scheme of things, where if you happened to forget, someone would help remind you—frequently with brute force.

For example, the Romans' comprehensive network of roads was, and continues to be, an engineering marvel. Even more, these roads facilitated amazing advances in trade, economic development, cross-cultural exchange, and international understanding.

Yet, at the same time, the muscle that went into the construction of these roads came by way of Rome's vast system of institutionalized slavery. These roads also gave Rome easier access for maintaining more direct control over a far flung empire, often with an iron fist—an iron fist enforced by very public crucifixions. Brian McLaren describes the situation this way:

The cross was Rome's brilliant way of eliminating uncooperative people. Imperial security forces would erect crosses conspicuously on hillsides near well-traveled roads near major cities of the empire...The quickest glance at a cross would cure almost anyone of the impulse to shake up the blissful status quo of the pax Romana that benefited everyone equally—except slaves, servants, tenant farmers, women, the people of border territories, soldiers, those not given tax breaks, and those unable to control the dreams of freedom and impulses for free speech.

Thus was learned the Roman way of peace through domination, a very uneasy peace, indeed.

As we consider today's story from Matthew 2:1-12, it is important to note that the privileged socio-economic and religious elites of Jerusalem maintained their own status quo by being willing accomplices and cooperative players in the pax Romana scheme of things. Herod in particular went along with the oppressive power structures of Rome in order to get along with maintaining his own power in Jerusalem.

So when they arrived in Jerusalem asking about worshiping a child recently born king of the Jews, the wise men were disturbing the peace—disturbing the peace, that is, of a ruthlessly preserved status quo. Which means that even from the time of his birth, Jesus was disturbing the peace—disturbing the peace of every kind of worldly status quo that operates contrary to the will of God. Which means that those who claim Jesus is Lord, those who truly seek to worship this Jesus and dare to follow him—namely, we who profess to be Christians—are called to disturb the peace of the worldly status quo for the sake of God's will being done through Christ, on earth as it is in heaven.

What does such disturbing the peace look like? Matthew gives us several indications.

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We are told that the arrival of the wise men frightened Herod and “all Jerusalem with him” [Matthew 2:3]. The deeper meaning of the original Greek suggests a kind of peace disturbing fear that is caused by agitation, a shuddering sense of unstable movement to and fro. Herod and all Jerusalem are shaken to the core by the presence of the wise men. By following the star and obediently trusting divine guidance, the wise men demonstrate that those who pledge their allegiance first to God’s authority tend to shake up the status quo—disturb the peace—of the powers and principalities of this world.

The wise men also disturb the peace by shaking up expectations. In today’s gospel lesson, those who should have a clue do not, while those who should not have a clue do. Herod and all Jerusalem should know better about the will of God. But the wise men—Gentiles who know nothing at all about the faith of the Patriarchs, Moses, and the Prophets—the wise men are the ones who are aligned with God’s purposes. When those you would most likely expect to run with the ball actually drop it, God has a habit of disturbing the peace of the worldly status quo by working with the least likely.

In the long run, the story of the wise men cautions us that no earthly institution is to be confused with, or be considered the epitome of, the reign of God. A centerpiece of the pax Romana was the assumed divinity of the emperor, who was often portrayed in terms of good news and salvation throughout the empire. But in his song about the magi entitled “Home by Another Way,” James Taylor starkly reminds us:

“Steer clear of royal welcomes

Avoid a big to-do

A king who would slaughter the innocents

Will not cut a deal for you”

Unrestrained human power never has heaven on its mind, especially when it appropriates religion to advance self-serving political agendas.

By following the star all the way to Jesus, the wise men participate in God challenging the status quo—disturbing the peace—of the world’s powers and principalities. We who presently seek Jesus are called to participate in this challenge as well, not only when it comes to our enemies, but also when it comes to assessing our own pax Americana. Here I have in mind how in his speech, “The American Dream,” Martin Luther King, Jr. uses the word ‘maladjusted’ to disturb the peace of our own nation’s worldly status quo. Here King declares:

...I say to you there are certain things within our social order to which I am proud to be maladjusted, and to which I call upon all of good will to maladjusted. Let me say to you I never intended to be adjusted to the evils of society. I never did intend to adjust myself to religious bigotry, I never did intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that still take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never did intend to adjust myself to the self-defeating effects of physical violence. And I call upon all of good will to be maladjusted because it may well be that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.

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The wise men went home by another way, home by a whole other way of being focused on and guided by God—home by a whole new way, truth, and life. The wise men went home, perhaps as the very first “people of the way,” which is how the earliest followers of Christ were described. The wise men discovered a peace wholly different from mere tranquility or the monstrous domination of the pax Romana or any earthly institution that practices the idolatry of assuming it has divine authority. The wise men countered the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, the peace of God that guards our hearts and our minds in Jesus Christ.

The wise men partook in the holy peace that disturbs the hollow peace of worldly status quo.

At one point in his song about the magi, James Taylor muses, “Maybe me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way.” As we enter this New Year, filled with all sorts of opportunities and possibilities, in what ways are we prepared to shake up the world with, and for the sake of, the way of the Lord?

