

“Nine Miles from God”

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1-7-18 Epiphany Sunday

Based upon Micah 5:2-5; Matt. 2:1-12

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day when we traditionally celebrate how wise men or “magi” from “the East,” traveled long and far following a star to find Jesus, the new “king of the Jews,” and give him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is a day when we recognize among other things, the in-breaking light of God coming into the darkness of our world, and God’s inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews in God’s plan for the salvation of humankind. But this year instead of focusing on who the magi were or what the miraculous star was, I want us to think about the other characters in the story which are absolutely critical, but usually overlooked: the chief priests and scribes. Matthew said that after the magi showed up at Herod’s palace inquiring about the birth of a new king, Herod called together “all of the chief priests and scribes of the people.” Scholars do not know if Matthew meant by this that Herod called upon the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of priests which oversaw the operations of the Temple, or if Herod called together a larger, ad hoc group of all the still-living men who had served as high priests or chief priests during his long reign, along with their scribes. But in either case, if it weren’t for the priests’ and scribes’ knowledge of the *Micah* prophecy about Bethlehem, the magi might not have made it to Jesus.

What really intrigues me about this group is that even though they were clever enough to know about the obscure reference in *Micah* to Bethlehem, as far as we can tell from *Matthew*, the chief priests and scribes never went with the magi or on their own to meet or worship Jesus themselves. The Jews had been waiting for a Messiah for hundreds of years, and presumably learned from Herod that the wise men believed that the messiah was either being born or had just recently been born. Bethlehem was just nine miles away—that’s roughly the distance between here and the Bowie Town Center—yet we don’t see any of them in our nativity scene bowing before the new born king or bringing gifts of their own. Don’t you wonder why? I do because if I knew that Jesus was in Bowie in person, I would get there one way or another, even if I had to walk. So I’ve been thinking about what might have happened all week. The following imagined testimonies are my take on what might have happened.

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“I am Simon ben Boethus, high priest of all Jerusalem from 23 to 5 B.C.E¹. For more than half of Herod’s reign I was the supreme spiritual authority for the people of Israel. I alone could go into the Holy of Holies in the Temple. I alone wore the Urim and Thummim which enabled me to discern the will of our Lord.² I was the head of the Sanhedrin, the highest judge of all that was holy and right according to the Lord, and authority over all that took place in the

¹ The names of the high priests I used are the real names of the high priests who served around the time Christ was born. Most scholars believe that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C.E.. So if the gospel writers are correct that Jesus was born at the end of Herod the Great’s reign, Jesus’ birth was most likely in 5 or 4 B.C.E.. Simon ben Boethus’ daughter Miriamne II was Herod’s 3rd wife.

² See Num. 27:21 and 1 Sam. 14:41). The Urim and Thummim was a device consulted by the chief priest to determine God’s response to “yes” or “no” questions asked by the leader of the people. Scholars think the device was made of rocks, and worn by the priest in a pouch over his heart on the ephod garment described in Exodus 28:30.

Temple. I was esteemed by my people, and Herod's right-hand man. (Don't believe the rumors. The fact that I gave my daughter Mariamne II to be Herod's third wife had nothing to do with that.) Of course, I knew of the ancient prophecy about the Messiah coming from Bethlehem. Of course, I saw the star. But there was no need for me to follow the strange stargazers to that city to see the messiah. I knew that God's messiah would need me when he was grown because of my power and because I have served as God's intermediary. Let the Messiah come to me."

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"I am Matthias ben Theophilus.³ I was successor to Simon serving as high priest at the time the strangers appeared in Herod's Court. As Simon was, so I am now the head of the Sanhedrin, and the only priest able to go in the Holy of Holies. But unlike Simon, I do not count Herod as family. In fact, I loathe Herod. Herod is not a true Jew. He does not serve God like I do. He is a travesty as a leader, who has no understanding of the Law. He allows Romans to sacrifice to their gods in the Temple. He decorated the Temple with a Roman eagle! I, not Herod, should decide how the Temple is run. I should be the leader of the people. But in order to lead I must appease him for his desire for vengeance against those he considers to be his enemies is known far and wide. To date, he has already killed 46 members of the Sanhedrin. 46! There is a reason that "all Jerusalem was troubled with Herod" when he learned the news of the messiah's birth. They knew he would want blood. I could not protect the Temple or preserve the Covenant of my people if I was dead, and I knew that if I went to Bethlehem and Herod found out, he would kill me. It was far too dangerous to go. Better to wait until the Messiah rose up against Rome. When God's chosen king came to me ready to overthrow our oppressors, then I would stand by his side."

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"I am Yacob ben Yoseph,⁴ scribe to the high priest, keeper of the Law for the Temple. I knew the Law better than anyone in Jerusalem, including the high priest. The Law is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I know all of the ancient prophecies too. It was I who told the priests about the prophecy in Micah. They were more interested in their power than the scriptures. They cannot read or write as well as I can. So I told them about the prophecy, but I also told them that this prophecy was very old and very vague. It does not say that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem, only that he will come from there. It does not say when the Messiah will come or how we will recognize God's chosen. The strange visitors came all this way because of a star. I do not let the stars dictate what I do. I am a keeper of the Law. No one knows when the Messiah will come, least of all people who believe their horoscopes. When the Messiah comes, he will fulfill the Law for all to see. He will make himself known."

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³ Matthias ben Theophilus was Simon's successor, and more likely the one in charge when Christ was born. I do not know if he was opposed to Herod. But most of the Sanhedrin was. It is true that Herod had 46 members of the Sanhedrin killed. It is also true that when he built the Temple he placed a Roman Eagle at the entrance, which so incensed the Jews that they tore it down. Herod hunted down those who did this and had them killed too.

⁴ The names of the scribes are fictional, as are their circumstances. I created the names from the most popular Jewish male names in the 1st Century.

“I am Avram ben Reuben. I too was a scribe at the time Herod called about the prophecy. After the Easterners mentioned that the stars proclaimed that Micah’s prophecy was fulfilled, I was curious. We have waited for the Messiah for so long. Could it be that the time had come? So after we met with Herod, a day after the visitors left but before Herod realized they were not returning, I went to Bethlehem secretly to see if they were right. After making some discrete inquiries, I found the place where the Easterners had visited. They were fools if they believed this child was God’s chosen. His parents are poor peasants. They have no power, no status. Their child looked utterly unremarkable. “Is this our savior?” I thought. “Was not Moses raised as a prince? Was not Cyrus an Emperor? Although David was a shepherd, even he came from a family of soldiers and worked for King Saul.” “This child cannot be the Messiah,” I thought when I looked upon the peasant child. “He’ll be lucky to survive until he is two.” And I was right. Because when Herod found out that the visitors tricked him, he ordered all the boy children in Bethlehem killed. I don’t know who the child I saw was. But whoever he was, he’s no more.”

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OK, enough modern Midrash. I don’t know that the priests and scribes thought these things, of course, although most of the facts I included are true. The priests who served under Herod were either corrupted appointees who did his bidding or adamantly against him. They all risked their lives serving with him, since Herod did murder 46 members of the Sanhedrin. They all also had their own ideas about what the Messiah would look like and do. But what about us? What keeps us from going the nine miles to Bethlehem in our hearts? Scripture assures us that God is near. The Apostle Paul even said, “In Him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28). Since no one is asking us to have the courage, daring or supernatural insight to travel across nations through all kinds of life-threatening circumstances to find God’s chosen, as Matthew says the magi did, and since we are not likely like Herod in the story, that means that we are most like the priests and scribes. We are religious people who have been told where to find God. But for many people, both in and outside of the Church, we are still willing to go so far and no further to pursue a relationship with Christ, even when the spiritual distance between us and God is short. Why?

For some, the problem is one of power. We like our lives as they are. We are in control of them, or at least feel like we are. We have schedules that work for us, dreams that motivate us, coping mechanisms that serve us. Basically, although it would be nice to know that God was with us, we don’t feel the need for God most of the time. This is particularly true of people outside of the church, but can be true of those inside as well. We aren’t willing to relinquish anything for God, so we never discover God’s better way.

For some, the problem is one of fear. God’s way is not our own. That means in order for us to follow it, we have to assume some significant risk. For people who are acutely aware of their sinfulness, the risk is that God will reject them. What if God isn’t as loving and forgiving as the Bible says? For other people, the risk isn’t that God will reject them; it’s that others they care about will. When I first was called into ministry, my father, who was a lawyer, was very upset by my decision to leave the law to go into the ministry. He was a man of law not

faith. By the grace of God, he eventually came around to my decision and became a great supporter of my ministry, so he was no Herod by any stretch, and was always motivated by love. But for about six months, it did feel to me like I might have to choose between God and him. Today, when being actively involved in Church is a counter-cultural thing to do, you don't have to feel called to ordained ministry in order to feel like following your faith means risking something. If you choose church over sports on Sundays, you risk the wrath of your kids' coach, or the judgment of your non-church going friends. If you choose welcoming strangers over securing yourself against them, you risk theft or worse. It's safe and easy to stay in Jerusalem. But to walk those last nine miles requires faith and courage.

For others, that walk would make sense if there was greater definitive evidence that God exists, and that Christ was God. But they don't feel sure of that enough to start moving. Like the scribe I called Yacob, they can appreciate the Bible intellectually, but they can't feel it spiritually. So until God spells out "I exist" in the stars as Buechner famously imagined, or until God lights up a small shrubbery in their backyard, there does not seem to be enough to justify rearranging one's life and priorities around Christ and his teachings.

And lastly, there are those who do seek God, who do walk the nine miles, but don't recognize once they get there that Mary and Joseph's boy is the one they have been seeking. Or to put it less metaphorically, they want to find God, but for a variety of reasons, never are able to feel that they have. I think a significant number of people in the Church feel this way. Even Mother Theresa felt this way for much of her ministry. She started out feeling certain about her faith, but as time went on she felt less and less able to sense God's presence while she worked. It is a gift of grace to feel God's presence, to recognize God's reality and discern God's leading. Scientists say that we all have been hardwired to be able to tune into the frequency of God's grace thanks to something called the God nodule in our brains. But in my experience, some people get much better reception than others.

So, what do we do? The star is shining, the wise men have just come, and Jesus is right now, even as I speak, so close that it would take very little for us to feel his love and experience his grace. I think we begin the New Year by recognizing that even we who come to church have more priest and scribe in us than we like to admit. We all like our power and control; we all have fears; we all crave evidence and have trouble recognizing God at times. In order to be able to follow Christ, therefore, we first have to let go of all those things that keep us in Jerusalem. Trevor Hudson, a South African pastor who has written several useful books on spiritual development, recommends a sort of meditative prayer he calls an "opening clenched fists" exercise to help disciples do this.⁵

You make yourself comfortable and place both of your hands in your lap. You can do this now if you want. Then you curl your fingers tightly into fists. Imagine that you are holding in your fists everything that is important to you—your life, your loved ones, your work, your possessions, your hopes, your dreams, the world that you control. Then also wedge into your fists your fears, your understanding of who God is, and your desire for proof and certainty.

⁵ Hudson, Trevor, *Discovering Our Spiritual Identity: Practices for God's Beloved* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 52.

Squeeze those fists—everything inside them is something your heart values dearly. Squeeze until you feel the tension moving up your arms from your hands, and into your shoulders and your back. Now, hear these words as if they are coming from a deep place within you. “For unto you has been born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. He is very near, and his kingdom is accessible to you now. All you need to do is open your hands so that you can receive the grace of God.”⁶ Then slowly uncurl your hands. It’s not a magic trick. You may not feel any different if you tried this just now. You may have to pray this way repeatedly, holding only a few valuables in your fists at a time. But if you repeat the exercise regularly, it can help you to let go enough to move from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, and if you’re already there as we are in the Church, to recognize God while you’re here.

Eugene Peterson once wrote that “The Christian life is going to God.”⁷ I never used to like that because I believe that if there’s one thing we can be sure of through Christ, it is that God comes to meet us where we are. But sometimes even when God is near, we still need to move ourselves to experience God’s presence. The trip isn’t a long one physically, but it can be a significant one emotionally and spiritually. Don’t wait for God to come to you; God has already done that in Christ. Go to God each day with open hands in prayer, and you will discover that although the Christ child is not who you expected, and his way comes with risk and change, he is here, and real, and all that you really need. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ I changed Hudson’s words a bit, but the idea is the same.

⁷ Peterson, Eugene, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 45.