

“Beyond the Three Wise Men”

There was a life size "Nativity Scene" at the edge of a small Georgia town. I could see great skill and talent had gone into its creation. But then I noticed the three wise men were wearing firemen's helmets. Unable to come up with an explanation, I stopped at a local convenience store. I asked the old man behind the counter about the helmets. He looks at me and says, ***"You stupid Yankees never do read your Bible!"*** I told him that I did, but couldn't recall anything about firemen in the Bible. He jerked a Bible from behind the counter and ruffled through some pages, and finally jabbed his finger at a passage. Sticking it in my face he said ***"See, it says right here, the three wise man came from afar."***

I've looked in various bibles and have never seen where it says that the Three Wise Men came from afar. Although in the song it does say,

***“We three kings of Orient are;
Bearing gifts we travel afar,”***

It was a long time before I figured out that these three guys didn't come to the stable to see the baby Jesus after the shepherds left. All the Nativity sets I had seen in my impressionable years puts these three guys and their camels just outside the stable waiting to come in and leave their gifts. Why even last Sunday we had Marty Horn, Charlie Copeland, and Rob Hatem come to the stable as Wise men.

The Matthew story is basically the same in all the translations of the Bible. I'd like to read the Matthew story from a different translation called ***“The Cotton Patch Gospel,”*** by Clarence Jordan. Jordan was Biblical scholar, a prophetic man of action, and a creative thinker during the struggle for the civil rights of all God's children. He founded an inter-racial community called *Koinonia Farms* in 1942. This became the home of ***“The Cotton Patch Gospel,”*** the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity, and other ministries. It is still a working farm, growing peanuts and pecans, welcoming visitors, and living what they call the “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.” People there are working side-by-side to make a living and to follow Jesus. They experienced opposition, even from those who worshipped the same God. This community still exists even though Clarence Jordan died in 1969.

Edward A McDowell Jr. says, “*Jordan was a powerful preacher. He spoke with the earthiness of Amos of Tekoa, the boldness of Jeremiah, but often with the tenderness of Hosea. There was something in Clarence of the gentleness of Saint Francis of Assisi...he spoke and wrote with the determination of Martin Luther.*” When Jordan preached he would write his own translation of scripture that he wanted to use. As time went by he realized that he created a translation that brought the Word to the reader with a new present-day authority. He put together individual books of the New Testament and eventually had enough to publish “*The Cotton Patch Version of Paul’s Epistles.*” For Jordan, this wasn’t a translation, it was a version. He took the text out of the “long ago and far away’ and put it in the “here and now.” It was created in the fields of the South rather than Palestine.

So this is the birth narrative in the “*The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew,*” Matthew 1:18 - 2:23.

18. The beginning of Jesus the Leader was like this: While his mama, Mary, was engaged to Joseph, but before they had relations, she was made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Since Joseph, her fiancé, was a considerate man and didn't want to make a public scandal, he decided to quietly break up with her. As he was wondering about the whole situation, a messenger from the Lord came to him in a dream and said, "Joe Davidson, do not be ashamed to marry Mary, because the Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. Now she will give birth to a boy, who you will name Jesus, because he will deliver his nation from their errors."

22. This whole event was the completion of what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Listen, a young lady will get pregnant and give birth to a boy, and they will name him 'God-is-with-us.' "

24. Then Joseph woke up and did as the Lord's messenger had directed—he married the girl. But he didn't sleep with her until she had her baby. And he did name it Jesus.

*1. When Jesus was born in Gainesville, Georgia during the time that Herod was governor, some scholars from the Orient came to Atlanta and inquired, "Where is the one who was born to be governor of Georgia? We saw his star in the Orient, and we came to honor him." This news put Governor Herod and all his cronies in a tizzy. So he called a meeting of the big time preachers and politicians, and asked if they had any idea where the Leader was to be born. "In Gainesville, Georgia," they replied, "because there is a bible prophecy which says: **'And you Gainesville, in the state of Georgia, Are by no means the least in the Georgia delegation; From you will come a governor, Who will wisely guide my chosen people.'** "*

7. Then Herod called in the scholars privately and questioned them in detail about the exact time of the star's appearance. And he sent them off to Gainesville with this instruction: "Go and find out the facts about the child. Then tell me what you have learned, so that I too may come and honor him." They listened to the governor and left. And you know, the star which they saw in the Orient went ahead of them until it came and stood above the place where the child was. (Just looking at the star flooded them with great happiness.) So they went inside the house and saw the baby with his mother, Mary. They bowed down and honored him, and opened the presents they had brought him—gifts of jewelry, incense and perfume. And having gotten the word in a dream not to revisit Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

*13. After they had checked out, the Lord's messenger made connection with Joseph in a dream and said, "Get moving and take your wife and baby and highball it to Mexico. Then stay put until I get word to you because Herod is going to do his best to kill the baby." So he got right up, took the baby and its mother and checked out by night for Mexico. He stayed there until the death of Herod. (This gave meaning to what the Lord said through the prophet: **"I summoned my son from Mexico."**)*

16. Then it dawned on Herod that he had been duped by the learned men and he really blew his top. He gave orders to kill all the babies in Gainesville and thereabouts who were under two, on the basis of the schedule which he had obtained from the scholars. (Then the saying of Jeremiah the prophet was given meaning:

*"A noise is heard in Ramah,
Great weeping and anguish;
Rachel is grieving for her children
And there's no consoling her,
Because she has lost them.")*

19. Now when Herod passed away, the Lord's messenger contacted Joseph in Mexico by a dream. "Get moving," he said, "and take the child and his mother and return to the South, for the people who were trying to take the boy's life have died."

*21. So he packed up and took the child and his mother, and returned to the South. He heard that Herod's boy Archelaus was governor of Alabama and so he was scared to settle down there. He was given instructions in a dream to go on over into South Georgia to the city of Valdosta. (This gave meaning to the prophet's word: "**He shall be called a Valdostan.**")*

Underneath the layers of carols, pageants, folklore, and costumes, the story of the Magi is a story of brutal power and the murder of children that is the background to the birth of the Messiah.

All Judea knew of Herod's reputation for getting rid of any rivals. He had three of his sons killed in 7 BC because he thought they were a threat to his throne. A pun on Herod's murderous insecurity and his kosher diet was offered by the Emperor; *"It is better to be one of Herod's pigs than one of his sons."*

So why did the Magi drop in on Herod on the way to see this new King of the Jews? They were gentiles from Persia and didn't know anything about Herod's past or what he was capable of. They trusted him. But the Magi wanted to bow down before Jesus, not Herod, and this frightened Herod. He met with his priests and scribes and found out the birthplace of this new King was in Bethlehem. These leaders knew the scriptures, but did not know how to read the scripture in relation to this threat or pinpoint where the threat was. Herod secretly meets with the Magi and asks the exact time they

first saw the star and then enlists them as unknowing spies to go off, find the boy and let him know where the child lives so that he can come and worship this new king.

The Magi learn from Herod that the child they are seeking was born in Bethlehem and they go off to seek this new King of the Jews. They may have learned from Joseph the true character of Herod. The dream which warned the Magi not to return home through Jerusalem parallels the dream in which Joseph is warned to flee to Egypt with his family. The only child in Bethlehem that Joseph knew to be at risk was the child in his charge. Egypt had long been a refuge for Jews fleeing persecution in Palestine, so another Jewish family's escape to Egypt would not be unusual. The family leaves for Egypt and the Magi find another route back home.

Herod's murderous violence is the standard response of the elite to a perceived threat. Herod ordered the massacre of all boys in Bethlehem and the surrounding area that were two years old and under. This was according to the information he received from the Magi.

The wording of the text sometimes leaves the impression that large numbers of children died, but the population of Bethlehem and surrounding area was about 1000 people. Scholars believe that the annual birthrate in that area was about thirty and with a high infant mortality rate the number of boys who might have died may have been fifteen or less.

The massacre of the children in Bethlehem echoes Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew babies in Egypt. Rachel crying for her children becomes a representation of Bethlehem's mothers who find no comfort among the lifeless bodies of slaughtered sons; the nameless, faceless mothers of nameless, faceless sons refused consolation for their children, "because they were no more."

What sticks out for me in Matthew's story of the Magi is called "*The Slaughter of the Innocents*," the murder of all the boys in Bethlehem two years old and under. There are troubling questions in my head that I can't answer. The Magi came to Herod and informed him of the birth of the newborn king and the time of the star's appearance as a

mark of the child's birth. Are the Magi to be implicated in the murder of the Bethlehem boys? Could God have prevented the killings by simply helping the Magi find the Christ child? Is God implicated through the Magi for the slaughter in Bethlehem? If God is less than God to 12 or 15 boys in a minuscule footnote within the sweep of the whole human story, then is God less than God in all the cumulative footnotes which number in the untold millions of murdered children over the whole human story?

I can't answer these questions. I can't even say if this story is true. There were no "Nightly News" reporters there with video cameras, no still photographers taking images of the dead children, no reporters to write the story for the next day's paper, and there is no other reference in the Gospels concerning the "Slaughter of the Innocents." So what are we to do with this story?

John McCutcheon wrote the song that Trevor sang earlier, "*No Mas, No More.*" On his web site he writes,
"We are a violent culture. Almost everything we are taught and exposed to reinforces that fact. In school, our history is a highway of war... Our heroes are warriors. The American three "R's" are quickly becoming Revenge, Retribution and Reinforcement. But there is a growing movement to include nonviolent conflict resolution as part of school curricula. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Tolstoy, and countless others offer examples and writings designed to instruct and guide us to study peace and nonviolence. Various groups have developed programs that rely on the three different "R's," Reason, Respect and Responsibility. Churches, synagogues and mosques need to teach it. Families need to teach it. And schools need to teach it. Can we afford not to do it?"

I will become a grandfather in 2008. My daughter is carrying her first child. For the past 25 years I have worked with children and youth. It has taken me most of those years to realize that there needs to be a change in the world. A change where my grandchild will be able to live, hopefully in peace, in a world where the air is fresh and not clogged with pollution, in a world where everyone will mourn the needless death of a child.

In November, at the School of the Americas protest I took part in, we were given a cross made out of paint stir sticks painted white. There was a list of names of people murdered by someone who was trained at Fort Benning. We each picked a name and wrote it on our cross. On Sunday there was the memorial vigil for all the people who had died at the hands of others in Latin America and South America. We lifted our crosses as the people on stage sang a litany of names of those who had died. When a name was sung, 25,000 people lifted up crosses and sang together the word “presente,” lifting up that person and the person on each of our crosses to God. On my cross was written, *“Child, 3 years old, son of Hilda and Felipe.”* This child didn’t have a name; a nameless, faceless son of a nameless, faceless mother.

It’s a new year, a “Do Over.” So what can we do to stand with others and say “No Mas, No More?” Some of our members are part of the Just Faith group at the church. Others have become interested in the More2 organization in our own community. Many people have participated in the Third World Sewing Machine Project in Guatemala. Our youth stand with the poor every summer during their mission trips. What will we do in this New Year, 2008, to stand with others and say “No Mas, No More?” And what will you do?

Benediction:

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples of the Americas have recognized corn as a teacher of wisdom, the spirit inseparable from the grain. They designed a story about “Grandmother Corn” to create a synapse in the mind, a lens in the eye, a drum in the ear, a rhythm in the heart. Listeners take the story in, think it through and when the need arises, apply its wisdoms to life. A Cherokee medicine man recognized its spiritual base. “In the beginning, the Creator made our Mother Earth. Then came Selu, Grandmother Corn.”

Every month somewhere in the world a crop of corn comes ripe. Every day somewhere in the world Grandmother Corn sings of survival. Somewhere in the world Grandmother Corn is always singing, No Mas, No More.