

What Does This New Day Hold?

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12

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We are at the turning of the seasons. I hope you had a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. In the Christian calendar, today is the ninth day of Christmas, we are three days from Twelfth night, and then we enter the season of Epiphany. This is a time of new beginnings, a time for starting over. And our Advent theme prepared us for that – Greet the New Morn, we proclaimed. So, with that new day having dawned, we might wonder exactly what's supposed to happen now.

The story of the Magi who bring their gifts to the child Jesus reminds us that the good news that this child represents is good news for all the nations. So, right at the beginning of the new year, we are reminded that our vision must be broad. That the good news, the joy, the love, the peace and hope of this season isn't just for us and ours. It is for everyone and everything. Part of our challenge in 2011 will be learning to make this vision manifest in our own lives. What does the message of the Christ have to say about how we are to live with others in this global age?

Behind Matthew's vision of the global good news, there was a longstanding Hebrew tradition of God's desire for unity among the nations and the Earth. A dream of all creation joining in peace and praise. It is a vision of universal harmony. And one of the scripture passages that expresses this dream is Psalm 72.

Psalm 72 is itself a royal psalm, ascribed "To Solomon." I read a variety of scholarly opinions on the origin of this psalm, and though they disagreed in details, they agreed on the overall theme and purpose of it. One writer thought that the psalm was composed for an anniversary of Solomon's reign. Another said that it was likely used during the coronation of new Kings of Judah. A third didn't locate the psalm with a particular event, but stated more generally, "the presence of [Solomon's] name encourages one to read this psalm in terms of hopes that actually attached to the historical kings of Judah."

Another writer, Anne Gardner, an Australian biblical scholar, wrote, "Psalm 72 pictures the king responding to God's gifts of judgment and righteousness by displaying the same attributes to his people." The psalm expresses a hope that the king will rule with the same justice by which God rules, a justice which defends the cause of the poor, delivers the needy, and crushes the oppressor. In

other words, Psalm 72 expresses the desire that the monarch will be the agent for bringing about the universal harmony that God desires. Through Israel's kings all the world will be blessed.

One of the features of Psalm 72 is the voice that the Earth has. When human society is just and righteous, then nature responds with greater prosperity and blessing. Our ancestors were more in tune with natural rhythms than we are, but we also understand the point the Psalmist is making. In our own time we have seen how nature responds when we exploit, consume, and pollute. Part of God's dream is that humanity will live in greater harmony with nature. And this will come about when justice and righteousness reign.

Psalm 72 is a grand vision of universal harmony inaugurated by the king. But here is where the irony begins. Solomon was not a good guy. Sure, he built the temple, but Solomon enslaved people in order to do it. For many contemporary Biblical scholars, such as the UCC's own Walter Brueggemann, Solomon is one of the big bad guys of the biblical narrative. Why? One reason is that Solomon worked to counter the liberation of the people that had occurred in the Exodus. God had set the people free from enslavement to the Pharaoh, and here is a Hebrew king acting like Pharaoh.

We know from the Bible itself that the people were so upset with Solomon's reign that civil war broke out when he died because the people wanted to rid themselves of his family and its rule. And with good cause. According to the biblical record, most of the Kings of Judah were pretty bad. The Hebrew prophets arose as a critique to the failures of the monarchy, and the prophets are particularly critical when it comes to the issues addressed here in Psalm 72 – the poor, the needy, the oppressed.

Instead of becoming a blessing to all the world, the kings of Judah aren't even much of a blessing to their own people. Forget the universal harmony of the nations and the Earth. Forget the mountains and the hills responding with abundance. Psalm 72 remains a hope, an unfulfilled hope.

Matthew, then, tells us the story of the Magi. The nations are drawn to this child. Even nature is involved, present in the star. This birth has global, even cosmic implications.

In telling the story, Matthew draws on this longstanding vision of the Hebrew people that through them the world will be blessed and there will be a universal harmony of the nations and the Earth.

But, instead of the dreams fulfilled in the king of Judah, Matthew tells us it will come to pass in Jesus, the child of Bethlehem. Matthew's story contains within it a critique of all earthly rulers who have failed to live up to the justice and righteousness of God.

The irony of the story, of course, is that Jesus is not a king. Or, at least, not a king the way we normally understand such things. He is the child of a rural peasant family. Born in the midst of scandal. Born as part of an oppressed people. In fact, even this child and his parents become political refugees, fleeing across international borders in order to escape assassination.

Here in this story and its ironies, we get the gospel in miniature. God's dreams for creation, dreams of righteousness and justice and peace are not going to be brought about by kings and their power. God's vision of universal harmony and the unity of the nations and the Earth will come about because humanity itself has been transformed in the way signified by this child of Bethlehem.

As long as the people hoped that a king would bring about justice, then they could wait for the king to do it and then sit around and complain when it didn't happen.

Instead, Jesus will come proclaiming that God has already set about transforming the world. And we must follow. In other words, we can't just sit back and wait for the change to occur, we have to be part of it. We have to respond to the justice and righteousness of God. As more and more of us begin to live justly and righteously, then human society and the Earth will be transformed. God's dream of universal harmony will be manifest.

Over the next couple of months, we will explore the discipleship that Jesus calls us to. We will focus on the Sermon on the Mount and the great and challenging messages it proclaims. As we engage this sermon and what it means for each of us and our community together as a congregation, we should not lose sight of the vision of Matthew here in the story of the Magi. The message that Jesus brings is not just for us, it is for the entire world. The nations themselves are to be transformed by the justice, righteousness, and peace that God desires.

Being faithful Christians includes learning to live in harmony with other people who are not Christians. Our own spiritual growth and development should lead us to greater global fidelity, or in the words of the psychologist James Fowler to become "incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community." Fowler sees the great challenge of our global age to be the development of a good faith which can "counter and transcend the destructive . .

. idolatries of national, ethnic, racial and religious identification and to bind us as a human community in covenantal trust and loyalty to each other and to the Ground of our Being.” For Fowler, this global vision is exactly what Jesus proclaimed when he said “the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Let me tell you a personal story that illustrates one of those epiphanic moments in my own life, when I had a personal encounter with this vision of universal harmony. It occurred in Fayetteville, Arkansas when I was serving as Associate Pastor for Student and Family Life at Rolling Hills Baptist Church. I was a new minister, fresh out of graduate school, learning as I went.

Fortunately, I got connected with our local Ministerial Association. We met once a month at the Mt. Sequoyah Retreat Center. Mt. Sequoyah is the highest point in Fayetteville, a beautiful spot with stunning views of the surrounding city and hill country. At the top of Mt. Sequoyah is this retreat center owned and operated by the United Methodist Church. It is a wonderful place to drive up to and can bring peace to the middle of any hectic day.

I want to tell about a particular moment I experienced there. But first I need to introduce the three other people involved. One was Lowell Gresham. Lowell was an institution in Fayetteville, representing the public voice of liberal,

progressive Christianity. He was the rector of the Episcopal Church and an excellent minister, one of the best I've known. Lowell had a great feel for the community and what role a minister should play in urging a community along. He was possessed of an astonishing ability to get free publicity, and he had such a good read on Christianity in America and where the future was leading.

Another person involved in this story was Geoff Oelsner. Geoff was ethnically Jewish but was a practicing Buddhist. Geoff looked like an old hippie, and there are many of those in Northwest Arkansas. He was a calm personality who had a strong desire to improve our community, especially for young people. He was avid about interfaith dialogue and the benefit it would bring to people. Geoff was also a musician and participated in a local open mic night that I attended faithfully . . . but only as an observer.

The last person involved was Talat Halman. Unfortunately, I had not yet developed a friendship with Talat. He was a professor at the University of Arkansas and a Sufi Muslim. Not being a minister, he was not originally a part of the group, but had been invited to join after 9/11 when we were committed to developing closer ties with the Muslim community. In fact, it was Lowell who had searched out Talat. On 9/11 Lowell was ashamed when he realized that he had no Muslim or Arab friends, and he was determined to make some. I appreciated

Talat's willingness to teach us and help us be better ministers in the post 9/11 world.

So, one day after our ministerial association lunch meeting, the four of us, Lowell, Geoff, Talat, and myself, were the last people to leave. We walked out of the cafeteria and toward our cars. The sun was shining and filtering down through the trees; everything was lush and green; it was a lovely day. Geoff told Talat that he had written a song that he wanted to play for Talat. The song was about Rumi.

Jalal-addin Rumi was the founder of the Sufi branch of Islam, to which Talat is an adherent. Rumi lived in the thirteenth century in the Persian Empire in what is now Afghanistan. He was a poet, and in all probability a gay man. His poetry expresses a deep and powerful mystical spirituality. This spiritual artistry was inspired by his love for Shams of Tabriz, whose disappearance and likely murder, inspired the great depths of insight from Rumi.

I had personally found great value in Rumi's poetry and that of the other Sufi mystics. His poetry is sensual and spiritual. It is playful and deep. It gives evidence of how humour can open up truth. Another thing about Rumi is that he wrote often about Jesus. He was deeply influenced by the Christ.

So, I'm walking on Mt. Sequoyah in Fayetteville with Lowell, Geoff, and Talat, when Geoff tells Talat that he has written a song about Rumi that he wants to play. Geoff goes to his car and gets out a very strange instrument. I don't remember what it is called, but it was some sort of Middle Eastern instrument that one played seated cross legged with the instrument in your lap. It involved keys and the plucking of strings. It made a haunting, magical sound.

Geoff began to play this piece he had written and to sing. He was singing about Rumi and Rumi's great love for Shams. Geoff's voice had this evocative, mystical power. The song was incredibly lovely.

Talat had been standing on the grass in front of Geoff. As Geoff sang, Talat became overwhelmed with a sense of worship. Talat then got down on his knees and began to genuflect, going through the postures and gestures of Muslim prayer.

Lowell and I stood by watching, transported to a place of deep spiritual connection. We both felt overwhelmed and grateful to have experienced this moment. A Buddhist who was an ethnic Jew, singing a love song about a gay Persian Muslim poet who had been deeply influenced by Jesus' teaching; a song that compelled its Arab hearer into the ecstasy of worship; all while a Baptist and an Episcopalian looked on.

This moment was an epiphany to me, in that it revealed a glimpse of the sort of universal harmony and peace that is coming with the reign of God on earth. God's dream will come true not when some king or president sets the world right. The message of the child of Bethlehem is that God's dream will be realized when each of us is transformed by the love of Christ.

Let me close with this quote from James Fowler:

As the power of the future, God is the promise of a unified and unifying future for all being.

Seen in the light of this vision the human vocation . . . is to live in anticipation of the coming reign of God. The human vocation is to lean into God's promised future for us and for all being. It is to be part of the reconciling, redeeming and restoring work that goes on wherever the Kingdom of God is breaking in. It is to be part of the suffering rule of God, to oppose those structures of life that block and deny the future of persons and being in God. The human vocation in response to the coming Kingdom of God is to live so as to honor – in others and in oneself – the futurity grounded in the promises of the faithful sovereign God. . . . We are called to live as pioneers of the coming Kingdom of God.

May it be so.