

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Causing a Stir
Matthew 1 & 2
December 6, 2009
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Before reading the text:

Well, while Russ had nothing to tell from Mark's gospel about the birth of Jesus last week, Matthew certainly makes up for it. But, get ready – there's still no manger, no swaddling clothes, no shepherds keeping watch in the fields, no heavenly hosts praising God, no "Fear Not." Not yet. But don't worry, you'll get your fill of that next week. This week it's Matthew's turn. "Matthew was the 'favorite' Gospel of early catholic Christianity. Although New Testament books, including the Gospels, were arranged in a variety of orders in the early manuscripts, Matthew was always first, just as it was the most-quoted by the Church Fathers . . . it was believed that Matthew was written first and, unlike Mark and Luke, that it was written by an . . . eyewitness . . . [but] during the 19th and early 20th centuries, a scholarly consensus emerged that Matthew used Mark as a major source, along with a collection of sayings of Jesus . . . called 'Q.' . . . Mark had been written in and for a Gentile Christian community no longer living under the rule of Torah (Mark 7.1-23). Matthew's Jewish-Christian community carried on a mission to Gentiles and was open to the insights of Gentile Christianity . . . The Gospel of Matthew has traditionally and popularly been known as the Jewish Gospel . . . Matthew wrote his Gospel for members of his own community to instruct them in their own faith and to clarify it over against misunderstandings, not as an evangelistic or apologetic writing directed to outsiders. [Scholars believe that] the Gospel of Matthew is not the product of an isolated author, but

reflects the life and concerns of a particular Christian community. Matthew has long been known as the most ecclesiastical Gospel, the only Gospel to use the word *church* to describe the community of believers. (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring)

While we are not Jewish, these are our ancestral roots. Given the audience and the focus of Matthew's Gospel, it's almost like this telling is more for us – the family – The Church. And isn't it amazing how often our family stories are the most difficult to hear? Have you heard – really heard – Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus? Listen. Really Listen.

Read Text

Family trees, stargazing, and murder – that's all we have to deal with today! I've lived with Matthew all week and have realized there hasn't been one feeling of peace and calm. It's what I hear that people need the most these days. It's certainly what I desire. A little calm in the midst of the chaos – something to warm our hearts and make us feel good. But that's just not going to be Matthew's job this week. Many of you know that my father's storytelling is simply a part of my makeup and identity. There are so many stories that I would love to hear him tell again. The fairly large lady that had pulled over on the side of the road – drunk and not able to wait until she got to a gas station to stop for a bathroom break (becoming larger and more drunk with every telling!) – wobbly on her feet, she fell down the embankment about the time Daddy happened by. I wish you could all have heard him tell how he got her back up that hill. I can hear him now, saying to the lady, “I believe if we'd all just pull our pants up that would help us get back up that hill a little easier.” Yet there are many family stories that I can't tell. They are for the family only. Whether it's shame or pain, there are some things that stay in the family. And I know my family is not the only one. Well, Matthew's story is kind of one of those stories – it's

for the family, and today we are a part of that family. Let's start with the family tree. "This list of names is Matthew's testimony that God works through the nitty gritty of ordinary human beings to bring the divine purposes to fulfillment . . . [note of inclusiveness] 5 women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, "the wife of Uriah," and Mary. Since ancestry and inheritance were traced through the father's line, reference to women in a genealogy was uncommon, but not unheard of. Since all the women mentioned are involved in some sort of questionable sexual behavior . . . Matthew is interested in affirming that the plan of God has often been fulfilled in history in unanticipated and irregular ways. Yet the main reason for Matthew's inclusion of these women corresponds to one of the Gospel's primary themes: the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of God from the beginning. All of the men in Jesus' genealogy are necessarily Jewish. But the four women mentioned, with the exception of Mary, are outsiders, Gentiles, or considered to be such in Jewish tradition." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring)

When I go back through my family tree and consider the stories of each limb, I am simultaneously amazed and awed and ashamed. There are folks that I am proud of and hope that their DNA is imprinted within my own because I want to be like them. And then there are folks that honestly bring shame to the family name. Doesn't your tree look like that? In the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel, I see something that I learned early on in pastoral care training – secrets must be exposed in order to diminish their power. The veil of secrecy is the demise of many. And Matthew will not have it. Matthew puts it out there for all to see – Jesus' family tree is not pristine. There is violence and murder and sexual promiscuity. "Proof" as it were that Jesus' family tree looks just like . . . yours. And mine. We should learn something from this. Those secrets of shame that we all hold close do not determine who we can be. We can be all that God

created us to be – even with the Tamars and Rahabs and the unmarried Marys in our lives. Our history does not hold all the power for our future. Jesus showed us that.

And so then there were some wise guys – they get counted often in our retelling as kings – but they were stargazers, astrologers, sorcerers, magicians, dream interpreters. They were from a “priestly class of Persians or Babylonians who were experts in the occult.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume VIII, M. Eugene Boring) Once they had heard all the ruckus of the birth of one that *had been born king of the Jews*, they followed this star – not to Bethlehem – but they end up in Jerusalem – about 9 miles off course. Everyone always seemed to end up in Jerusalem – a place of power. And there they asked for directions. (Maybe they really were wise after all!) But a place of religious and political power is not the birthplace of Jesus. They bring gifts and upon seeing this precious baby they are *overwhelmed with joy*. And in the story, we have no time to linger there, though that’s where we want to stay. We always want to stay in a place that gives us the warmth and comfort that comes with gazing upon little babies. Jesus, even in his first moments on this earth, seemed to be causing a stir that will not allow us to rest and simply delight in him. We all yearn to be *overwhelmed with joy* and just live there. We so desperately want to park and idle in the labeled *Overwhelmed with Joy*. It is disappointing and appropriate that today the city of Bethlehem is far from a place where one can be *overwhelmed with joy*. When I was there 2 years ago and had lunch with Mitri Raheb, the pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, and heard him tell what it is like to live as a Palestinian Christian, being bordered by walls that divide, I was reminded that all is not well in our world. It is so easy to live my faith here. But even in our land of freedom our Jewish brothers and sisters over on Providence Road do not have the same easy life that I have. We want, at Christmas, to

bask in the radiance of being *overwhelmed with joy*, but Matthew will not let us linger there, for the wise men were warned in a dream that Herod was up to no good.

When powers and principalities are challenged and threatened, violence is certain to ensue. So far, Jesus has done nothing but be born. He is, thus far, a fairly minor character in the story. He has not spoken. He has not acted. He has simply been born, and already he has caused a stir because his life, from the very beginning, challenged the way the world operates. When Herod felt threatened, he acted upon his fear, and we have in Matthew's story what has become known as the Slaughter of the Innocents – the killing of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or younger. Threat and fear make folks do things that are truly unbelievable. Jesus caused a stir alright and I wonder – is that our Christmas calling this year. Do we, as followers of Jesus, need to cause a stir?

It has been unfathomable to me that the week that I have spent preparing for Advent *Peace* is the very week that our President called for more troops – a surge in Afghanistan. I could have sworn he was going to cause a real stir in Washington in trying something different from what we've always done and what we always do. In my little tiny way, I tried to cause a little stir myself by signing on to a letter to the President week before last from Sojourners community. The letter read in part:

Dear Mr. President,

We believe, that after eight years of war, we need a whole new approach in Afghanistan.

We speak not as military or political strategists, but as citizens seeking to faithfully apply our moral values to this most crucial issue. We are concerned that the discussion in Washington, D.C., is far too narrow. We respectfully and prayerfully suggest that you pursue a strategy built

on a humanitarian and development surge. Massive humanitarian assistance and sustainable development can rebuild a broken nation, inspire confidence, trust, and hope among its people, and undermine the appeal of terrorism. And it costs less - far less - than continued war. Lead with economic development, starting in areas that are secure, and grow from there - providing only the security necessary to protect the strategic rebuilding of the country. Do not make aid and development another weapon of war by tying it so closely to the military; rather, provide the security needed for development work to succeed. This kind of peacekeeping security might better attract the international involvement we so desperately need, both from Europe and Arab and Muslim countries. Finally, it is time for a vigorous, public, and ongoing conversation between the government and the faith community about the moral and ethical implications of our policy decisions. The collateral damage of our technological war is great, resulting in many civilian deaths - further alienating the populace and, inadvertently, producing more recruits for terrorism. Mr. President, we urge you to take the approach of effective humanitarian aid and development and genuine engagement with the moral issues that confront us in Afghanistan. As always, you are in our prayers as you seek the right decisions to these most difficult questions and choices.” (A full copy of the letter can be found on sojo.net.)

The Herods of the world are still alive and well. They are them and sometimes they are us. From the moment Matthew starts to pen his tale, we see that Jesus came to this world to cause a stir. We see it in his family tree. We see it in the early relationship between Mary and Joseph. We see it in the magi who make a long trek to simply catch a glimpse – and they are not disappointed, but rather they foil a plot by Herod who then takes out his vengeance on the innocent. For all the warm fuzzies we seek, for all the times we long for a calming of the chaos, I can't help but wonder if what we need to be doing is causing a little stir ourselves. I don't know

what you have facing you that needs to be stirred up for the kingdom of God or stirred up in order to find healing or stirred up to bring about real shalom – peace – but whatever it is – may you find the strength of the baby who came at Christmas who showed us the way. May it be so.