“By Another Road”

Matthew 2:1-12

January 7, 2017

The universe is telling us something. Listen to the universe. Have any of you heard a line like that? It seems like using “the universe” as a term like that has been used a lot recently. All over TV and the movies, “the universe” seems to be a sort of secular spiritual term. I saw the movie, “Father Figures” last weekend. It stars Glenn Close, Owen Wilson, Ed Helms, Terry Bradshaw, Christopher Walken and a lot of other stars. Kyle and Peter, twins played by Owen Wilson and Ed Helms were told by their mother that their father had died when they were very young. One day Peter is watching Law and Order and he sees an actor that looks just like his father from an old picture that he has. So he confronts his mother and she admits that that man was not his father. She tells them that their father is Terry Bradshaw. Kyle and Peter head off on a road trip to find him.

Kyle is a rather free spirit who is always optimistic, while Peter is grumpy and resentful of how easy Kyle’s life is. Kyle says “listen to the universe”. Peter gets upset by that, “what does that even mean?” he yells. That was exactly what I was thinking. What does that mean? Throughout the trip, they had many shenanigans and at every turn, Kyle would say, “the universe is trying to tell us something.” Hopefully this isn’t much of a spoiler, but at the end of the movie, the brothers become rich by making an app that sends daily messages of positivity to people that are from the universe. Every day, a person who has the app gets a call from “the universe”. To me, the universe feels like such an odd term. Do you mean God? Are you afraid to say God? Or is it just a term that people who are not Christian use? That could be a sermon or thesis for another day.

Most cultures of the ancient world in the time of Jesus had many gods. The romans had multiple Gods. Israel just had one God, and they were always in conflict with other cultures that had multiple gods. We don’t know exactly where the wise men were from. They might have had multiple gods. Or maybe they had “the universe”. Perhaps the wise men felt that “the universe was telling them something.” So they went to Jerusalem.

The wise men from the east were determined to get to Jerusalem. We are not sure if they had to travel across mountainous terrain like here, but it was still quite the journey. The got to Jerusalem and they didn’t quite know where to go. So they wonder around. “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? A bunch of foreigners just wandering about town asking crazy questions. People probably brushed them off. Who are these guys? What in the world are you all talking about?

We don’t know much about these wise men which in Greek is Magi. One idea is that they were of a priestly class in Persia. If that is the case, then they had significant power. One scholar argues that the magi also lead a rebellion that attempted to end the rule of very cruel rulers. Then this would set quite the tone that they are also going to bring revolution to Israel. Another possibility was that they were astrologers. They read the heavens and advised rulers on their plans. O good King, the stars seem to be leading you to peace, or whatever decision it may be. That job would be very precarious as they could pay a heavy price. If the ruler did not like what they had to say, then off with their heads. Another possibility is that they were magicians and frauds. They scammed people with fortune telling and the like. Like our modern-day psychics that you see with a little neon sign in their windows. That sort of magic was forbidden by Hebrew scripture and they would definitely not be welcome in Israel. Whatever they did, they were in Jerusalem causing trouble.

Someone finally brought wind of this to King Herod. He was frightened of this news and apparently the entire city was fired up. King Herod has for most of time been reviled as an awful King and person in general. Most introductory textbooks to the New Testament describe Herod as renowned for his ruthless exercise of power. Now the scholarship around Herod has begun to paint him in a more positive light. Ehud Netzer had this to say about him: “He was a practical and thorough man, with a broad world view, outstanding organizational talent and improvisational ability, able to adapt himself to his surroundings and to changing situations—a man who anticipated the future and had his two feet planted firmly on the ground.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He was a gifted ruler that went along with the Romanization of the time. He was trying to rule within the growing influence of the Roman empire. Whatever the scholarship says about him, the gospels definitely are not kind to him. When he got the news of the wise men wandering around asking questions, Herod summoned the experts. The chief priests were part of the high-priestly houses that supply candidates to the high priesthood. The scribes were a retainer class of experts in the law and its interpretation.

The Magi were able to get to Jerusalem because they had seen a star and the “universe was telling them something”. I would imagine that Herod would like a little more proof then that. So the scribes and the priests were able to find a little bit of scripture to help this situation. They quote in Matthew a combination of Micah 5:1-3 and 2 Samuel 5:2. “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” Herod now had an answer to what they were talking about. The wise men were wandering about asking where is the king of the Jews. Herod wanted to know where but also who. Herod was king of the Jews. That’s me. Who is claiming to take me down? Regardless of how scholars have battled over what Herod was actually like he was a climber of the career ladder. It took him a long time to get to where he was. He decided to get out in front of the cultural changes of the time. He recognized that the old ways of governing were over and he was going to lead the Roman parade. So as one who had spent his entire life climbing the political ladder he was not happy that a child was going to have his position of power. Herod liked to get rid of people who don’t serve his ambition. Herod had ten wives, ordered multiple assassinations, which included his own sons. He also changed succession plans multiple times as he decided who was going to take his throne when he died. Here he had another opportunity to find out how to get rid of this problem child.

With that in mind he summons these Magi. If these Magi were unaware of their mistake of coming to Herod, they were now. As I said earlier, they may have been used to being in the court of Kings. They may not have been used to the rage at which Herod was coming at them with. It is easy to see the contrast between the Magi and Herod. The magi came to Jerusalem with great joy. Herod is meeting them with great anger and fear. Now the Magi have unwillingly turned into emissaries of Herod. No self-respecting monarch of the time would travel to see a child born into a peasant family who is being proclaimed as his successor. Herod feeds the Magi some word service and directs them to head to Bethlehem. So off they head to Bethlehem which is one of the backwater places of Israel on the King’s orders.

On the way to Bethlehem, the Magi were guided by the star. Then the star stopped. They were overwhelmed with joy, seeing that the star that had brought them there was true. It worked. The entered the house seeing the baby Jesus with Mary. They knelt down to honor the “King of the Jews”. They opened their big treasure chests and offered up gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are very extravagant gifts. I wonder what Mary thought about this. None of this is useful for a baby. What about toys and other baby stuff of the times? Tradition says that gold is fitting for royalty, frankincense for Jesus’ future priestly duties and myrrh signifies that he will suffer. Myrrh is a burial spice. Rather odd gifts for the child born into poverty. These guys were true believers. Gentiles from the east that practiced a reviled occupation to the Israelites.

It is ironic that the chief priests and scribes had no interest in what was happening in Bethlehem. They devoted their lives to studying God’s law but show no interest in their findings from Micah. They wouldn’t have had to travel far to check it out. They couldn’t translate what they read into action. They were at the center of power so who cares what happens to a poor family on the margins. Quite the contrast to the faith of the Magi.

The Magi were warned in a dream. Dreams have an important place in Matthew. Joseph was about to leave Mary, but had a dream that told him to stay. Joseph later on has a dream that tells him to take Mary and Jesus to flee to Egypt. Dreams for us today are usually nonsense. The dreams I usually have are ridiculous. A lot of them are about my high school or college days. They usually are about having avenged the losses I had in football or wrestling, getting one more chance in athletic glory. But in the ancient middle east, dreams were supernatural and were important divine communications with humanity. The Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. They left by another road for their home country.

By another road. A very important phrase. They could have gone back to appease Herod, but they noticed the specialness of this child. To keep him out of harm’s way, they go back by another road. What dreams do we have as a church? I am interested to find out. How do you want this church to relate to the community? How do you want this church to bring you closer to God? How do we get there?

I look forward to hearing from many of you making known what your dreams are. They could be working with people in addiction. They could be reaching out to young families in the community. They could be making our food pantry reach out to others better. What are the roadblocks? What other road could we take?

Listen to the universe. Or in better terms listen to God. God is still speaking to us and bringing us epiphanies. It may not be as earth shattering as the incarnation of God into human flesh. But still very important. Can we embody the faith of the Magi? Knowing that there is a way to get there. Not quite sure of the exact path, but knowing that there is something special in store for us. Sometimes it takes the faith of an outsider to shock us into action. Listen to your dreams. The powers of this world may try and prevent us. It may be that there isn’t enough money. It may be that we don’t have enough time or energy. It could be any number of issues. Let’s go by another road. It is there if you look. Amen.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**The Visit of the Wise Men**

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:   
6 “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
   are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
   who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

1. McCane, B “Simply Irresistable: Augustus, Herod and the Empire” JBL 127, no. 4 (2008): 725-735 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)