“But Wait...There’s Myrrh!”

Matthew 2:1-12

Ephesians 3:1-12

Sarah Wolf

January 2, 2022

When I was doing campus ministry in Memphis at Rhodes College a few years ago, we had our Presbyterian students sit down with students from Rhodes’ Muslim Student Association to have a conversation with each other.

While we ate pizza and carrot sticks, the Presbyterians asked what it was like to be a student who was Muslim in the Deep South of the United States. The Muslim students asked what made Presbyterians different from other Protestants. All of the students bemoaned the exam season that was swiftly approaching.

Mentions of exams led to a pivot in the conversation. It was Christmas time and we were in the middle of yet another Starbucks Christmas cup controversy. The Rhodes chaplain asked the students from the Muslim Student Association what it felt like to be a Muslim in America during Christmas time when the decorations on a coffee cup were enough to make news headlines. Did they feel left out? Was the constant mandate to “be of good cheer” wearisome? Were they just yearning for January and for things to quiet down again?

One of the students began to answer the questions by reminding us that Christians and Muslims share Jesus as an important figure in both faith traditions. Although they do not recognize Jesus as the divine Son of God, Muslims do believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and came to proclaim the Gospel. I saw some of my Presbyterian students raise their eyebrows in this new knowledge.

But also, she continued, I really like the Christmas season. I like it because it’s a warm season — not temperature-wise, but feelings-wise. Everyone is just a little nicer around Christmas time. Everything feels a little more hopeful. She went on to talk about the decorations. “I love the colors of Christmas — everything in shades of green, red, and white. And I love all the lights.”

This was a surprising answer to me. When the chaplain asked it, I inwardly cringed. What in the world might they say about how Christmas seems to permeate every aspect of life for Americans this time of year? The student’s answer definitely surprised me. I was not expecting it at all.

Now, I will admit that my job in Memphis was exhausting. Young adult ministry director at a 1500-member church. Starting a brand new campus ministry at Rhodes College. Re-starting one at the University of Memphis. By the time students returned to campus after Thanksgiving break, I was ready for my college students to scatter and return from whence they came, just for a few weeks so that I could focus solely on the big Advent season at the big church full of young adults.

But the answer from this young woman from the Muslim Student Association stopped me short. In that moment, my views on the Christmas season - of the desire to send the students away for a time, of the desire to be finished with the Young Adult Christmas party that was always a headache every year, of the desire to avoid a young adult-hosted event called Waffle Sunday which made this sticky avoidant pastor cringe every year — in that moment, when the student shared her views of Christmas, I began to shift my views of the Advent and Christmas seasons.

It wasn’t my Advent devotion that led to this shift. It wasn’t an inspiring Advent sermon series. It wasn’t watching families light the Advent candles each week.

It was this student who was a Muslim, who loved how nice we all were at Christmas, who loved the hope she felt, who loved the lights.

Today’s Gospel passage is one that is probably very familiar to us. I would guess that many of you still have your nativity scenes set up in your homes and they all include three of our main characters from today’s story. Call them what you want — Kings, Wisemen, or Magi — they are very familiar characters to us, welcome to stand slightly off to the side, complementing the shepherds and sheep on the other side of the manger, all angled slightly to worship and adore the wee babe. We are very familiar with them.

But at one time, these three folks were very unfamiliar. And I think we’ve lost that memory. Because it’s an important aspect of the story.

The three that came from the East are important to the story, both because of who they are, but also for who they aren’t. Who are they?

Biblical scholar Paul Achtemeier suggests that, “Rather than picturing them as three royal riders outlined against the desert sky, it would perhaps be more accurate to think of a larger caravan including magi, servants, supplies, and the like, who have apparently been traveling for weeks if not months.” Achtemeier also goes on to suggest that they are most likely not from Arabia despite the many centuries of portraying them in Persian clothing, but that most likely their point of origin was from Babylon, the seat of ancient astronomical studies. That’s who these visitors are. Now let’s find out who they are not.

The magi are not Jewish. They know nothing of the prophesies. They know nothing of the Jewish traditions or the Jewish expectations and yearnings for a Messiah. All they know is, they saw something new in the sky and felt compelled to follow it. And when they arrive in Bethlehem, they find the Holy Family, in their meager circumstances, and yet, there is something about this mother and father and their newborn. They bow down and worship.

These folks are outsiders, and yet, they feel compelled to worship. Do they know that he is the Messiah? Most likely not. Most likely, they didn’t even know that the world was awaiting a Jewish Messiah or that all the signs pointed to this baby as the Messiah. But there is just something about what they find in Bethlehem that drives them to worship. In fact, in the Greek, there are 4 different words in verse 10 to describe just how overcome with joy they were. They can’t explain it or where it came from, but the joy is there and it is overwhelming.

It’s interesting to juxtapose the magi against King Herod. While the depiction of them as kings is probably an incorrect image, it is interesting to note that kings from outside the Jewish tradition are the ones who recognize the baby as worthy of worship and not Herod - the King of the Jews.

In fact, it’s the outsiders who play some of the most important roles in the nativity story.

There is a popular tweet that has been shared and re-shared over the past few weeks among religious circles that says, “It’s an unwed woman who carries God. It’s the pagans from the East who recognize God. It’s the workers in the field who hear from God. It’s the marginalized neighborhood who welcomes God.” All of these folks mentioned - Mary, the magi, the shepherds, even Bethlehem - are outsiders, unexpected guests at the birth of salvation.

And yet, as the tweet concludes, “It [is] God who chooses the lowly and the broken to rise.”

God chose those folks to be the first witnesses to the Word made flesh, to Emmanuel - God with us. It wasn’t someone important like King Herod or any of the chief priests or Pharisees. Instead, God chose outsiders and outcasts to be the first to see, to witness, to worship, and then to go back out in the world to tell others what they had seen.

Sometimes we find signs in unexpected places or people that point us to Christ.

Sometimes, God still manages to surprise us.

We are continuing a new-ish tradition here at Covenant this week. For the third year, we will receive our Star Words. If you’re unfamiliar with star words, this new tradition involves selecting a piece of paper that has a word on it. This word is meant to be a guiding word for you over the next year. We suggest putting it somewhere that you will see it often — perhaps on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror or in the console of your car. Someplace where you will see it often.

If you receive a newsletter, you’ll get your word this week with the newsletter. If you don’t receive the newsletter, or you have more than one person in your household, we will have the star words box set up in the vestibule later this week.

The idea behind the star words is that like the magi followed a star to greet the Christ Child, perhaps the words printed on these stars might guide us as well to discover something about ourselves or about God.

Because these words are picked at random, I firmly believe that God uses them to show us something each year, often in surprising ways. At a recent examination of new elders, one elder-elect shared that her 2021 word initially made her throw back her head and laugh. Her word was solitude. It’s easy to find solitude in the middle of a pandemic. But then, she decided to really lean into the word and to seek out different kinds of solitude. She learned to be still and to listen for God. She learned to appreciate what solitude can offer. She welcomed God in to surprise her with solitude last year.

My prayer for you, Covenant, in the coming year, is to open your heart to the ways that God will surprise you in 2022. Whether it’s through seemingly unlikely people — folks who look differently than you, think differently than you, vote differently than you, or worship differently than you. Listen to what those folks have to say and see if God might be using them to point you toward some kind of truth about God or the world.

And maybe see if God might be using you to do the same for someone else as well.

All praise be to God. Amen.