

Arvada

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

January 03, 2010

Rev. Rusty Butler

What's with the myrrh?

One of the things that interested me in seminary biblical studies was the way that the New Testament writers made use of texts from the Old Testament. Of course, we all know that to some extent or another but I didn't know it was so pervasive.

For instance, you've already heard the words from the gospel of Matthew and we've known the story of the Magi since we were children, but many of us might not have heard these words from the book of Isaiah...

Isaiah 60:1-6 NRSV

Arise, shine for your light has come, camels, gold, frankincense...

Sound familiar?

The scripture in Isaiah actually refers to the glory of Jerusalem which at the time of the writing had been ransacked and laid to waste by Jerusalem's enemies. The author was writing a word of hope to the people of Jerusalem and telling them that in time, kings would come to Jerusalem and bow to the light they found there and they will bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Well that is interesting in light of the story we get in Matthew, who is also writing to a Jewish audience living in a difficult time and hoping to connect Jesus with the Hebrew bible and with writings from the prophets. The writer of Matthew uses quotes, or paraphrases or alludes to the Hebrew Old Testament at least 60 times and some

scholars have suggested at least 140 times. The formula, "all this happened in order to fulfill what the Lord declared through the prophet..." (The New Testament, Stephen Harris, p. 90) was used almost a dozen times in the gospel of Matthew.

Today let's consider again the Magi and their gifts.

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts help lead us further into the mystery of faith. Amen.

I have an interesting job. I try to tell people this all the time but I'm not sure they believe me! On New Year's eve, I got a call that said the police would meet me at the church. The caller said, an alarm had gone off. Usually when that happens, the alarm just goes off and we come up here and nothing happens and no one is here. But when I got here, there were four different police vehicles. As I was walking up the walk there was a group of young men who were all lined up sitting in a row against the side of the building, Two police officers were standing near them. I noticed they were all dressed in basketball gear, shorts and tshirt and sneakers. One of them called out to me, "Rusty, we are glad you are here!" I looked and there were a couple of former members of the youth group who had come with some buddies to play some basketball in the center. But they had opened an unlocked door and the alarm had gone off. Now there were police and a k-9 unit and police with their pistols drawn walking around inside the building. It was all quite exciting.

I looked at the young men and then I looked at the police and I said to the police, I have no idea who these guys are...No just kidding. We got it all straightened out. Interesting though, sometimes this job.

I got a note from Katie Fisk another member of the youth group from some years ago, she is a graduate student in Hawaii learning about how to manage disaster relief. She wanted to have lunch and I said ok, during our lunch I told I would be preaching on the three wisemen. This week, she sent me another note, her aunt had sent her a card with a picture of a scene it was after the three wise men left, three

wiser women arrive bearing gifts of casseroles for a week, diapers and formula, and an in-home nanny.

It is an interesting job.

Here is another part of my job...on New Year's eve, I started researching Myrrh. I should have started earlier, but you know me. Of course, I googled it, like you all would, to find out that myrrh is basically the dried sap of a certain kind of tree found primarily in Yemen, Somalia and Ethiopia and Jordan. Have you ever seen the sap that comes out of pine trees when it hardens? It's like that except somewhat yellowish red in color.

One person said that in New Testament times, myrrh was five times as expensive as gold, maybe! Right now you can go to the internet and get three pounds of it for \$55. That's about \$1.15 an ounce. Gold is about \$1100 an ounce. The price of myrrh has gone down! Buy low sell high!

Myrrh is referred to about a dozen times in the old testament, mostly in the Song of Solomon. That book is rated R so you'll need to read that for yourself. Needless to say...it is interesting.

In the New Testament, myrrh is referred to just four times. Here in the gospel of Matthew, and then three other times. In Mark, Jesus is offered wine mixed with myrrh when he is on the cross, In John, when Nicodemus comes to claim the body of Jesus the gospel says he comes with a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes. And finally in Revelation, where myrrh is included in a list of about twenty different items which the merchants cannot sell because Babylon (which is Rome in this case) has fallen in John's dream.

One last thing about Myrrh..It was used as an embalming ointment, with its strong smell, it would help to mask the odor of a decaying body. Have you ever smelled myrrh?

(Hand out the myrrh!!)

I told you my job was interesting!

So why did the writer of Matthew include it as one of the three gifts which the magi brought? Perhaps as some have inferred maybe it was a way to foreshadow the death of Jesus and that he would need myrrh as part of the preparation for his death. But Matthew never goes back to it. In Matthew, the wine that is offered to Jesus on the cross is mixed with gall (which is a bitter liquid but not necessarily myrrh) but there is no mention of myrrh. It's possible that Matthew just picked up a cultural tradition during his time when frankincense and myrrh were found together. It's hard to tell.

The gospel tells us that the magi come, and tradition tells us it was three magi most likely because there were three gifts.

In 66 CE about 20 to 25 years before most scholars believe Matthew's book was written, there are three different reports of magi or astrologers from foreign lands going to see Emperor Nero. Nero ruled Rome from 54 to 68 CE when he killed himself. A fire destroyed most of Rome in 64 AD, and that's where we get the saying Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Nero, looking for scapegoats for the fire, began torturing Christians. And during the last few years of his rule, many Christians were arrested and thrown to the beasts, crucified, and burned to death at night where they served as 'lighting' in Nero's gardens. It is believed both Peter and Paul were killed during Nero's rule. For these atrocities Nero became known as the first "antichrist", Martin Luther was the second.

Of course, the way my mind works, I ask myself if it is possible that when Matthew was writing the gospel, he knew of the visit of the magi to Nero and simply transferred it into his birth narrative. It's possible that the story happened just the way Matthew wrote it. Whichever it was the story asks us a question and that has something to do with once you've made it to see the baby Jesus, what difference does it make? Or to bring it home, once you are a member of the church, been part of the church what difference does it make?

This week I received two letters one from a long time member of the church who asked that their membership be removed. When ever we get a note like that our antenna go up and we wonder what have we done wrong. But in this case the person just said, over the past several years I haven't put anything into the church and I haven't got

anything out of it.

I appreciated that. It seems honest and it seems right. If you don't put anything in, you won't get anything out.

The next day I got a note from a young woman, she's around 30 and a member of the youth group back in the nineties but hasn't been to church for a number of years. In the note, she said, "In looking through the most recent issue of the Horizon's magazine, I came across the church mission statement. Beautiful!!! (Three exclamation points.) She went on, "I really appreciate the inviting nature of the church and the inclusiveness and openness that one feels when there. There are many things I appreciate about AUMC. The mural reiterates the church mission statement. The labyrinth gives the community a place for self-reflection and the church provides a variety of programs. Please accept this gift in gratitude."

The story of the magi is a puzzle. The questions we have about it will probably never be answered.

But the story more importantly is a mystery and the mystery has to do with the idea that when people come to see Jesus, they hardly know who he is at first. But when they leave, like the story says, they leave by a different road. They know that what they've experienced will not leave them the same as when they came. May it be so for you and for me.

Benediction...

it will matter what you put into it. It matters and it will make a difference about what you will take out of it.

*303 421 5135 6750 Carr Street 80004
arvadaumc.org*

A church where science, religion and life are compatible