

A Jesus Blessing  
Sunday, January 5, 2014  
Matthew 2.1-12  
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Epiphany at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Today marks 10 weeks that I have lived in New Orleans as a new resident. Some days it still feels like we are on a long visit, other days it feels like we have lived here for years, but always it means something exciting is going on. I love to people watch and observe, eavesdrop in restaurants and make mental records of bizarre snippets of conversation. New Orleans must be the single best city in the world for such hobbies.

I remember riding the streetcar along St. Charles Avenue one Saturday, years ago. I think I was a teenager on this particular visit when we drove past one of the churches and saw a bride fleeing from the building, a man not dressed for a wedding chasing after her, then well-dressed folks in tuxedos and formal dresses pouring out behind them. The streetcar just plugged right along the line, and one of its passengers simply commented, "Oh, that's nothing. That's just New Orleans."

This morning on my drive to church, slightly before 8 a.m., I noticed a man with long white hair pulled back into a ponytail. He had a thick, full, white beard, and he was wearing a floor-length black kimono with sandals. I do not know what he was doing on Carrollton Avenue at that early hour, but he wandered into the street, saw something, picked it up, then wandered back to the sidewalk.

We learned last week that we have a neighborhood peacock living just two streets away from us. Neighbors say it has lived there for 5 years, feeds on bird seeds at one resident's house, then roosts at dusk in a live oak just behind Stuart Hall School.

This is a city for wild stories that become mundane because they are so plentiful. The elegant homes and beautiful people who live in them are as much to be expected around town as the loud woman with the wild black and red hat we heard holding court in Patisserie on Maple. She spoke loudly and casually about Flannery O'Connor level death and loss across the years of her life just as easily as she spoke of loving this city.

I admire a town that is big enough for everyone; a place where the reserved, the garish, the modest, the decidedly immodest, the profane, the sacred, the ordinary and the extraordinary can coexist in one community.

As I have studied Matthew's gospel lately, I note a similar theme with Jesus. When I add Mark, Luke, and John to the mix, then the theme grows stronger: all kinds of people are drawn to Jesus, there's room for all of them, and the ones who are drawn to Jesus most often want to bless him in some way.

If you were here last week, you know that we skipped ahead in chapter 2 as Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with Jesus upon hearing word from the Magi that Herod planned to kill all of the children around Bethlehem ages 2 and under. We have largely focused on the stories themselves as all of the characters in Matthews 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> chapters are receiving night visits from angel messengers.

But stepping back from the story to look at the characters of the drama, we notice there is a second story. "Jesus, born in a small town in a totally Jewish environment, was visited by wise men from another world. These foreigners [like the shepherds of Luke's story] came into the midst of chosen people and claimed [Jesus] for their own."<sup>1</sup>

The Magi were astrologers. Perhaps the kind that a leader like Herod would use to discern or devise what to fear, what to plunder, what to defeat, what to destroy. But they aren't working for Herod, and Matthew makes no ill comment about their vocation as magicians or scholars or givers of wisdom. These are people from the East who know are drawn to Jesus.

As we move through Jesus' life and ministry over the next 12 or so weeks, we will see a diverse representation of people all compelled to be near Jesus—drawn to him in ways they themselves do not seem to always understand. From his very first breath, Jesus welcomes unexpected guests to his side. Those society deems important or unimportant, the strictly moral and religiously stringent faith leaders, the seeking and curious disciples, the wealthy, the poor, the Gentile, the Jew. There is no single character described as the Christ follower in Matthew's or any other Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Ken Kesselus, "*Us*" and "*Them*", January 6, 2013

These characters all want to be near Jesus in some way. They bring gifts, they speak a good word, they reach out to touch him, they invite him home to dinner, they linger around the table after the meal and listen to him with great focus and respect. They want to bless him and to be blessed by him.

We will sit with this idea of blessing for a while; maybe not the whole year, but at least for the first three months.

A diverse, broad, wide range of people are drawn to Jesus, they offer various types of blessings to him, they seek often desire Jesus' blessing for themselves, and then Jesus teaches them to bless one another.

I have begun working my way through Myron Madden's book, *The Power to Bless*, as I have been thinking about this word for us in the New Year. In chapter 7, he looks at the story of Jacob and Esau and invites us to consider the perspective of Esau, the one who suffers "without the camp" or beyond community. "The gospel is the courage to take blessing to all the Esaus who suffer 'without the camp.' It asserts power of all the...forces of curse and has the courage to include the leper, the demonic, and Zacchaeus. It extends the umbrella of God's loving care to all [people] everywhere and to each particular [person] at his [or her] point of need."<sup>2</sup>

Preacher and Writer David Lose asks: "Have you ever noticed just how powerful it is not only to receive blessing but also to name it and give thanks for it? Maybe you're at dinner with family or friends, and it's one of those meals, prepared with love and served and eaten deliberately, where time just stops for a little while and you're all caught up and bound together by this nearly unfathomable sense of community and joy. And then you lean over to another, or maybe raise your glass in a toast, and say, "This is great. This time, this meal, you all. Thank you." And in seeing and giving thanks, the original blessing is somehow multiplied. You've been blessed a second time."

I believe the challenge a faith community in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, in general, and New Orleans, in particular, is to welcome the diversity of people who continue to be drawn to Jesus and offer a blessing—a sincere good word in Jesus' name—to each person of each background, each worldview, each ideology. We are drawn to the person of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Myron Madden, *The Power to Bless*, Broadman Press, 1970; pp. 142 and 153

We want to bless him with our presence and our words, we desperately want to receive God's blessing on us through Jesus, and the next step is that we must go and bless one another.

In his book *Life of the Beloved*, Henri Nouwen writes, "I am increasingly aware of how much we fearful, anxious, insecure human beings are in need of a blessing. Children need to be blessed by their parents and parents by their children. We all need each other's blessings—masters and disciples, rabbis and students, bishops and priests, doctors and patients."

To bless is to speak well or say good things of one another. "To give someone a blessing," writes Nouwen, "is the most significant affirmation we can offer."<sup>3</sup>

When we open ourselves up to God's mysterious presence, when we see and experience God's goodness in our lives and in the world, the response of faith is to turn to that source and speak blessings—to say good things to God and to each other, about our lives, about this world, to point to the original goodness of it all.

God wants this for us. We are created to be people of deep community and sacred blessing.

I learned just a few days ago about a tradition, primarily in Lutheran and Catholic parishes, called the Blessing of the Epiphany Chalk. On the Feast of the Epiphany, the priest, wearing white vestments, will bless the Epiphany water, [frankincense](#), gold, and chalk. The chalk is then used to write a blessing above the door of one's home.

This year's marking is 20+C+M+B+14.

The "20" is for the first 2 numbers of the year, the 3 letters are the first Initial of each of the kings (said in tradition to be Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar) and the last 2 numbers are the last half of the year. The "C, M, B also stands for the Latin blessing *Christius Mansionem Benedicat* which means "May Christ Bless this House

The pastor or priest speaks a blessing over the chalk, and then the person writing on the house prays something like this:

Hear us, O God, and cherish, protect, be with, and defend all who live in my house. I

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<sup>3</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992; pp. 67-69

write this blessing over the doors of my as a reminder to us and to all who enter here that my house is truly a house of the Lord.

O God, make the door of my house wide enough to receive all who need human love and companionship; narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and strife. Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back tempter's power.

O God, make the door of my house the gateway to Your Kingdom. I ask these things in the Name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

As we prepare to share in our communion meal today, I invite you to join me in thinking about blessing this New Year. How might we welcome one another in the way that God welcomes us in Jesus Christ? How might we welcome the full range of characters that are drawn to Jesus? How might we speak a good word over this congregation, a good word of each other, a good word over what we hope God will do in this place in 2014?

For the past two months we have celebrated that God has welcomed us into a new era. In the weeks ahead, we will dedicate that era to God and begin to discern as a community what that era might look like. Today, we begin with an act of blessing.

In just a moment, when I invite you to come forward for communion, we will share in this meal by intinction—dipping the bread into the cup and taking as one. Then you will find a selection of Epiphany chalk and some of the words I just spoke. Take a piece to write a word of blessing on your home today. But I also invite you to make a detour before you return to your seat and bless this place in one of two ways: exit the sanctuary doors and write a word of blessing on the steps or brick of the church or, if you'd prefer to remain inside, stop at the black board in the Harris Room at the back of the sanctuary to write a blessing word there. The blessing can be whatever you want it to be.

As we prepare for this meal of remembrance, consider how you are drawn to Jesus. What blessing do you have to give, what blessing do you long to receive, and how might you bless others that we become a reflection of Jesus' gospel because there is room for us all at this table.