

JANUARY 1, 2012: SOLEMNITY OF MARY
Numbers 6:22-27 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:16-21

It takes lots of practice and knowledge to insert yourself into the world of the sacred authors. Most Scripture readers mistakenly presume the writers composed their works for us. We need only pick up the Bible, read it and we'll instantly surface God's message. I often remind my students of the obvious: had these authors written for us, they'd have used English, not Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

Today's readings show us how a biblical writer's frame of mind can be quite different from our own.

Our Number's passage, for instance, contains some of the best known lines in the Hebrew Scriptures. We employ the Blessing of Aaron in formal benedictions and especially in ecumenical and inter-faith gatherings. "Yahweh bless you and keep you! Yahweh let his face shine upon you, and be gracious to you! Yahweh look upon you kindly and give you peace!" Who could find fault with such harmless prayer?

There's really no problem with it - as long as we're petitioning God for fertility! All Hebrew Scripture blessings are fertility blessings. People with lots of children, huge flocks of sheep and goats, and acres and acres of grain-producing fields are a people blessed by God. In a world with no concept of an after-life, as we know it, fertility was paramount. No one was concerned with being blessed with a higher place in heaven.

In a similar way, Paul had a different frame of mind about Jesus than many of us have. In his seven authentic letters, he says almost nothing about the historical Jesus. Today's passage from Galatians is about as much as he ever tells us about the Capernaum carpenter who lived between 6 BCE and 30 CE. "When the fullness of time had come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters."

The Apostle's faith revolves around the risen Jesus ("the Christ"), not the historical Jesus. It's Jesus alive in the community today to whom he's dedicated his life - the Christ -who, as he says back in chapter 3, is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, man or woman.

Throughout his gospel, Luke asks a question most of had answered as children. What does God expect of us? The answer we usually got made for a simple, easy life of faith: just do what the church tells you to do.

I hate to tell anyone whose faith has yet to go beyond those first formative religion classes, but Luke doesn't give that answer. He doesn't give any answer, he gives us a person: Mary. She's the one who does what God wants all of us to do. Notice the theological background music which always plays when Jesus' mother comes on the scene, especially in the passage in which he quotes an anonymous woman in the crowd. "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" the excited woman yells. Jesus immediately comes back with a corrective: "Blessed rather are those who hear God's word and carry it out."

For Luke, the perfect Christian is someone who constantly surfaces God's word in his or her life, and is courageous enough to carry it out. If Mary is blessed, it's not because she's Jesus' physical mother, but because she's doing what God wants all God's followers to do. In today's gospel, she "kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." It's by such reflection that we discover God's word.

The Vatican II document on the church bought into Luke's theology. In it, Mary doesn't tell us to follow the church, she's actually the "type" (the example) of the church. The gospel message is clear: All of us, as church, should constantly be listening for God's word, and carrying it out.

Once we spend the time to learn about our sacred authors, we almost always surface something different from what we've learned in the past.

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There's a reason Matthew narrates the story of the magi. He's the only evangelist to write for a Jewish/Christian community. The other three direct their gospels to Gentile/Christian churches. Most sacred authors gently try to expand the faith of their readers; in today's gospel, Matthew employs a sledgehammer.

We naturally try to restrict things and persons which are beyond us into patterns of behavior with which we're comfortable. God's relationship with us certainly falls into that restricted category. Many Christians, for instance, believe God works only through and on behalf of Christians. I presume many Muslims and Hindus fall into the same trap. There's no doubt many Jews at the time of Matthew were also guilty of restricting God's actions to their specific religion, even some Jews who had committed themselves to imitating Jesus.

As we hear in today's Third-Isaiah passage, the classic Jewish prophets often tried to expand the vision of the Chosen People to include non-Jews in Yahweh's plan of salvation. "Nations (Gentiles) shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance." In other words, "If you live your Jewish faith correctly, even non-Jews will be compelled by your example to give themselves over to Yahweh."

Not only that, but a time when Jerusalem and its temple are nothing but a pile of rubble, the prophet believes those enlightened Gentiles will give you the wherewithal to be a mighty nation. "... The riches of the sea shall be emptied out before you, the wealth of nations shall be brought to you. Caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah; all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of Yahweh."

Yet, there's no reason to believe such Yahweh-oriented Gentiles will remain Gentiles. The presupposition is they'll eventually convert to Judaism. The problem Jesus' first Jewish followers quickly surfaced was that's not how the Holy Spirit was guiding them in the case of Gentiles who also wanted to follow Jesus. At first, such Christ interested non-Jews were expected to convert to Judaism before they could imitate the risen Jesus. Only after the men were circumcised and both men and women committed themselves to keeping the 613 Mosaic laws could they become Christians.

Eventually liberals won the day. People, like Paul and Matthew, contended that Gentiles, as Gentiles, could be followers of Jesus. The Pauline disciple responsible for Ephesians states, "... Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." One no longer must be a Jew in order to be a Christian.

That's where Matthew's magi come in. They're uncircumcised, pagan, Gentile astrologers who eventually travel miles to discover "the newborn king of the Jews," while Herod and his Jewish Scripture-knowledgeable court refuse to go the relative short distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem to find the child. Not only that, the magi reach their destination by following a star: a practice forbidden to Jews under pain of death!

Matthew's message is clear: God works through people and means which some in his community would restrict God from working. Those who correctly follow Jesus must constantly go beyond such limits in order to discover God working in their everyday lives.

There's just one last point: the myrrh. It's an oil frequently employed to anoint dead bodies. (One of my profs, Dr. Irvin Arkin, always referred to it as "embalming fluid.") It's Matthew's way of reminding his readers that those who follow Jesus must, like even the child Jesus, be prepared to die. Perhaps we must die every day by permitting God to break through the restrictions we've imposed on her.

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