

Centripetal Mission in Matthew: Wise People Come to Jesus! -- A. H. Mathias Zahniser

Matthew 2:1-12 Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3: 1-12.

Have any of you ever visited the Science Center in Saint Louis? Did you ever enter it or leave it through the planetarium? Did you ever put a coin in the cone-shaped device near the entry of the building that devours coins? You drop your coin in a slot at the edge of this inverted cone and it circles its way to disappear down the hole at the center of the cone. This is an example of a force that scientists refer to as “centripetal,” which literally means “seeking the center.” We will call it “drawn to the center.” The opposite force scientists call “centrifugal,” which literally means “fleeing from the center.” We will call it “sent from the center.” That’s the force of a rocket’s engine that sends it to put its space capsule into orbit.

For 17 years I was a professor of Christian world mission at Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky; the word for my profession is “missiology,” the study of Christian mission. We who call ourselves missiologists speak of two basic types of Christian mission:¹ one we call “centrifugal mission”; you can guess that “centrifugal mission” is “sent-from-the-center mission,” missionaries “sent out,” to the nations, as in the song “We’ve A Story To Tell To The Nations.” The Apostle Paul speaks of centrifugal, “sent-out,” mission in our Ephesians reading for today: *grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ ... so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known* (Eph. 3: 8-10). Paul goes out from an established Christian center toward the Gentiles with the good *news of the boundless riches of Christ*.

Our lesson today from the Gospel according to Matthew features the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus. This is **centripetal**, “drawn-to” mission. But where are the missionaries? There are none in a traditional sense because no one is sent out to inform these wise men. Then how can it be a mission, this centripetal “drawn-to-the-center” mission? God is the missionary; it’s God’s mission. God sends out from the Church to the various ethnic communities and God draws various ethnic individuals and groups to Jesus and his Church. Indeed, another thing I learned as a teacher of Christian mission is that whether there are missionaries or not God is always engaged in drawing people to Jesus and his Church. The Church is crucial to both types of God’s mission. In both cases Christians have to tell the story of Jesus and live in such a way that it appears true.

Now let’s look more closely at the centripetal drawn-to-Jesus mission of God in the story of these wise men.

Who were they? Most likely they were astrologers. They are often referred to in English translations as the Magi, the word for them here in Matthew’s Greek. According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, “these Magi were often associated with a priestly caste,” and were “wise in interpreting the stars.”ⁱⁱ They could very well have been from ancient Parthia, the empire bordering the Roman Empire to the east. A principal Parthian city, Ctesiphon, on the bank of the Tigris River, was about 500 miles northeast of Jerusalem.

What were these wise men looking for—these star-gazers—that could justify a trip by camel from Parthia to Israel? *Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? ... We ... have come to pay him homage* (Matt. 2:2).

I learned from my graduate work in Near Eastern studies that ideas spread much farther among ancient civilizations than would be expected. This insight helps me imagine that rumors of a coming king, born among the Jews, who might unite a divided world in a government like that celebrated in our reading from Psalm 72, would certainly have spread beyond Israel. Now consider this imaginative, but very possible scenario:

Bartholomew, a Jewish merchant visited the Parthian city of Ctesiphon on the bank of the Tigris River in the late first century BC. In a moment of free time he was outside the coin exchange and reading aloud from a scroll called *The Psalms of Solomon*.ⁱⁱⁱ A wise man passing by interrupted him with “What are you reading?” “Listen,” said the merchant, “it’s the longing of my people for a righteous king like David of old, of whom I am sure you have heard.” “Read!” said the wise man whose name was Melchior. So Bart read, “O Lord ... raise up for them their king, the son of David, at the time ... you choose, O God, to rule over Israel ... And gird him with strength to shatter in pieces unrighteous rulers, to purify Jerusalem. And he shall gather a holy people whom he shall lead in righteousness” (17:21-22, 26). When Bart stopped reading, Mel asked, “What writing, may I ask, is this?” Bart answers, “It is a rather short gathering of poems for worship, expressing the assurance of the coming of a king like David who will transform Israel and the world. It is very much like the more ancient words also attributed to the great King Solomon, ‘In the days of this great and righteous future king, *may righteousness flourish and peace abound ... and may people blossom in the cities like the grass of the field.*’” Bart chanted more verses he had memorized from Psalm 72. Then he lamented, “No one knows when Messiah’s time will come.” “Hmm,” sighed Mel to himself, “maybe I and my fellow Magi can figure that one out by observing the stars.” Already Mel was planning to look toward Jerusalem for a sign.

What were the magi looking for? They were looking for a better world. And where did God meet them? He met them where they were looking, **in the sky**. Their centripetal mission would soon begin, because God would draw them with a star. Remember God is the missionary in centripetal, “drawn-to-the-center” mission.

Now what is the application of this to us today? Maybe you have already guessed. **These days the nations are coming to us. For a wide array of reasons people are fleeing in the direction of democratic centers.** As in the case of the Magi, God knows why every immigrant, migrant worker, and refugee are drawn in our direction. And **God has already met them where they were looking; and God’s centripetal, drawn-to-Jesus mission, is flourishing!** Missiologist Ralph Winter wrote decades ago, “The existence of 137 languages in Los Angeles makes clear that now ... the nations are still coming to the light.”^{iv}

Some are just desperate, others need a job, many are drawn to our 200-year-old American democracy. God is engaged in this flourishing number of precious people drawn into our communities; and this gives us Christians a chance to exhibit the virtues that Jesus taught and exemplified. If we act like Jesus acted and obey what Jesus commanded, **many of them will want to know him.**

What is the main role of stay-at-home missionaries who cooperate with God's centripetal, drawn-to-Jesus **and his Church** mission? I think it could be essentially **hospitality: objectivity, true friendship, and Good-Samaritan neighborliness**.

Let me offer some examples.

Hospitality—like Adam's objective university teaching. Adam Szabados is a professor at a state university in Budapest, Hungary. I met him this fall, while we were both studying at Tyndale House in Cambridge, England. He offered a course on apostolic authority in the New Testament at his state university. Because he was teaching at a secular university he stuck to evidence that could be shared and critiqued by any person wanting to be objective; he tried to avoid arguments based on faith in God or sectarian scholarship. To his surprise, five Muslims signed up for the course. One, a Muslim prayer leader, preacher, and pastor, became intensely interested and accepted an invitation for dinner with Adam and the prof's wife, who gave her testimony. Later this Imam requested that Adam take him through all the passages in the New Testament where it is clear that the apostles believed in the deity of Jesus. He did this and the journey brought tears to the eyes of the Imam. The Imam was another pilgrim on centripetal mission, whether he realized it or not. The story has not ended, but Adam returned to Budapest and to his teaching.

Hospitality—like that of Emily's "true friendship." Emily A. Hager, (daughter of our own Brian and Darlene Hartley) reports the following interaction with her Muslim students in her English language class, when a doctoral student and teacher at the University of Missouri, Saint Louis. This is as she remembers it and relates it five years later in her dissertation. (All names have been changed for the participants' protection.)

One night, one of my students, Mana, said to me, "Teacher, how do you make small talk with your neighbors?" After I told her about talking to them about weather, sports, kids, bringing over cookies, and other such general topics, she said that she had taken cookies to her neighbors, and they slammed the door in her face. I was stunned. ... I asked the others in the class what they would do in that situation. That's when I discovered that she wasn't alone in her story. Alima told of visiting a bank in Milwaukee in her hijab and being accosted by a man behind her, saying, "I hate you because my son is fighting over in your country and our boys are dying." He'd assumed she was Iraqi ... ; [S]he and her family were Palestinians and had fled from another scene of violence. Tibah, who was Iraqi, had even more frightening stories: being spit on, neighbors taking their kids inside when hers came outside to play, and further isolation.^v

Emily's form of hospitality, in her own words:

I have found that the best way to really reach out to Muslim friends is to study and seek to understand the Qur'an. ... I've found that many Muslims I know have read the bible and understand it/read it more than many Christians. ... The more I read the bible, the Qur'an and some Hadith [traditions of Muhammad], the more prepared I feel to talk about Jesus and the saving grace he provides. I also make it a point ... to never drink alcohol, eat pork, or be alone in a room with a Muslim man when in the company of Muslim friends, to respect their traditions and beliefs. I also ask a lot of questions about their beliefs and talk simply openly and honestly about my beliefs and practices. ... I think the important steps are to 1) remember that true friendship requires not only sharing your own faith but really listening to Muslims about what they believe; 2) read more from the Qur'an or trusted

Qur'anic scholars^{vi} so as not to create a 'straw man' argument or misunderstanding about what [Muslim] ... friends really believe; and 3) know what ... [you, yourself] believe ... and live this to the best of [your] ... abilities.^{vii}

Pamela's Good Samaritan neighboring. "Be kind ... to the neighbor," commands the Qur'an (Q 4:36). *Love your neighbor as yourself* Jesus insists (Matt. 19:19). Fourteen-year-old Shirin's father was an Iranian whose work for Iran Air involved lengthy times away from the family's Seattle home. Pamela, a vital neighborhood Christian, made friends with Shirin's family and especially with her mother. Pamela spent a lot of time with Shirin's mother, listened to her worries and went to Weight Watchers with her. By the time Shirin's father returned, fleeing the Iranian revolution with no job, his wife was feeling sick. In spite of extensive care, she died of leukemia three months after her first trip to the hospital. Shirin's father was devastated. In a short time he had lost his wife, his job, and was alienated from his country of origin. Enter the scene, Pamela! Long afterwards Shirin wrote:

Pamela quickly organized the family and the neighbors to make funeral arrangements and provided temporary child care for my brother and me. She had often talked with my mother about the need to turn to Christ during a time of great need. Now she focused her efforts on my brothers and me. She cared for us, along with her own three children, with supernatural love. She fed us at her home, transported us to athletic events and on our paper routes, and, when our father returned to Iran to salvage his assets and look for a new wife, Pamela and her husband let us move in with them.^{viii}

The wise astrologers from the east came seeking a king like the one predicted for Israel. **God led them to Jesus.** People are still coming to us whom God is leading to Jesus. Let us greet them with the gifts Jesus brought, as lyrically celebrated in "O Holy Night." I have asked Megan McPeak to sing "O Holy Night," which stresses what came to the world as a result of Jesus' birth; it is these things we need to emulate when people come to us seeking refuge, hospitality, fraternal love, and freedom for a new beginning.^{ix}

[Some results of Jesus' kingdom from this powerful carol are listed here for readers: "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till He appeared and *the soul felt its worth*. ... The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger, in all our trials *born to be our Friend. He knows our need* – to our weakness is no stranger. ... Truly *He taught us to love one another; His law is love* and *His gospel is peace*. Chains shall He break, for *the slave is our brother*, and in His name *all oppression shall cease*. ... Let all within us praise His holy name!"]^x

ⁱ See Jonathan Lewis, "Two Forces," in Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, editors, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, third edition (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1999), 60-61.

ⁱⁱ Ben Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus," in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is an apocryphal Jewish book of psalms attributed to Solomon from the first century BCE. One can get a copy of it from googling the title. See L. W. Hurtado, "Christ," in Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 107.

^{iv} Ralph Winter, "Four Men, Three Eras, Two Transitions," in Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, editors, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 254.

^v Hager, Emily Anastasia, *Narrative Identities of American Muslim Women in the Midwest* (Doctoral Dissertation). (University of Missouri--St. Louis, St. Louis, 2012).

^{vi} For example, John Esposito, *Islam: the Straight Path*. 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 1998)

^{vii} Hager, Personal communications. July 1 and 5, 2012.

^{viii} Shirin Taber, *Muslims Next Door: Uncovering Myths and Creating Friendships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 21.

^{ix} Is it any wonder that Shirin Taber, now a Christian, has authored a book (see the previous note), a valuable read for anyone who wants to know Muslims and introduce them to the Jesus of the Gospels? She frankly explodes such myths as “Muslims and Christians have nothing in common spiritually”; “all Muslims hate the West”; and “all Muslims are radical fundamentalists.” She knows, and instructs her reader, about creating friendships by entertaining, forging alliances, relating in the work place, and making friends on campus.

^x http://www.hymnary.org/text/o_holy_night_the_stars_are_brightly_shin