

Blogging toward Christmas: Magi at the manger

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December 20, 2010

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For the first five years of my ministry, I served a small church bereft of young children. Christmas presented the perfect opportunity to delve into the mystery of the incarnation; our Christmas Eve services dripped with candle wax and Christology.

In my new call as an associate pastor at a large suburban congregation, I'm responsible for the Christmas Eve pageant. Candles are out--too dangerous for the wee ones--and there's little room at the inn for theological rumination when there are donkey-costuming logistics and Joseph-casting crises to address. (If anyone has ideas about how to convince high school boys that acting in a pageant is cool, do share.)

My colleague Jan, from whom I inherited this task, is mildly scandalized by my decision to include a manger-side visit from the Magi. I figure if [Glee](#)

has taught us anything, it's that mash-ups are a way of honoring original sources--Luke and Matthew should be pleased that their work has been given a pop culture remix. But Jan's concern is valid. She doesn't want us to treat these stories as if they are no more sacred than tales of Santa Claus or the tooth fairy, so that the children grow up and feel they've been misled.

I know the pain of such disillusion; I experienced it the other day when I reread Luke's Gospel and realized that the cattle were nowhere to be seen, let alone heard lowing lullabies to the little Lord Jesus. The manger is there, but the beloved animals are not. There isn't so much as a donkey for transportation. To think that Aleem Maqbool went to [all that trouble](#) to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem by donkey for that BBC special a few years ago!

I wish I could say I didn't immediately dash to Jan's office to share my ~~victory~~ discovery. Perhaps I would have had more self-control if she hadn't scribbled, "Can one of the kings be Elvis?" in the margin of my pageant draft.

Christians

are familiar with the nativity story, but not only from hearing it read at church. We're also familiar with it *through popular culture*, the story as it is refracted through art, hymnody and *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever*. I'm not sure this is a bad thing; after all, these interpretations honor the spirit of the incarnation by fleshing out the stories. All those apocryphal details give us more to grasp and be grasped by.

Of

course, this means that it is all but impossible for people to really hear Luke's account of Jesus' birth, no matter how eloquently Linus or the liturgist reads it. This may be a gift to the preacher, in a roundabout way. The pressure's off. There's no need to parade our complicated theology, which tends to make sermons so heavy they land with a thunk two feet in front of the pulpit. There's no need to fret about textual inaccuracies-- some people will see the three kings whether they are there or not.

All we can do is tell the story with great hospitality, making room for the whole beautiful mess into which Christ is born: the sorrows, anxieties, distractions, shallows and even the imaginations.