

“Unreasonable, Irrational, Out of Control”

The Rev. Lauren McDonald  
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Matthew 2:1-12

When I was a youth, I participated in our church’s Christmas pageant. The older kids read the story out of the Bible while the younger kids played the roles of Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and animals and wise men. We all sang the appropriate Christmas carols that went along with each part of the story. Like most Christmas pageants we combined the stories from Luke’s Gospel and Matthew’s Gospel so that after the angels told the shepherds to go to Bethlehem to see the new baby, the wise men showed up, following their star. It didn’t matter that in Luke’s Gospel there are no wise men or that in Matthew’s Gospel in which there are wise men, they actually show up to Joseph and Mary’s house, not a stable, and Jesus is probably about two years old instead of a newborn infant. What mattered was that all the kids were able to participate in the telling of this story.

One year one of the wise men was a kid named Ferris. Now Ferris was a lively child. On the afternoon of the pageant his exuberance got a hold of him, and when we began singing “We Three Kings,” he sang progressively louder and louder each time we got to the chorus, until he was drowning out the entire congregation. Pitch was not nearly of the same importance to Ferris as volume “Oh star of wonder, star of night.” It made everyone laugh at first, and then it just became downright annoying. We got lots of mileage out of it at our house, though. Whenever we sat around the piano singing Christmas carols that year, my brother and I could not resist mimicking little Ferris, singing, “Oh star of wonder…” and then dissolving into giggles. We

found his loud singing inappropriate. For us, the pageant had been ruined by overly enthusiastic singing.

Every now and then over the years, our family has related the story of the loud wise man, and we laugh at the inappropriateness of it. It wasn't until I remembered the story last night that I rethought my reaction to little Ferris. Perhaps his singing came from his desire to be the center of attention. Or perhaps it was just another way he found to disrupt something – he had been known for that. But maybe, just maybe, young Ferris had the right idea. His singing seemed to be unreasonable, irrational, and out of control. There's a lot that's unreasonable, irrational, and out of control about this story.

It's unreasonable that Herod, the king, would feel so threatened by Jesus' birth that he would have his soldiers kill every child in Bethlehem under the age of two in order to assure that this so-called king would not live to usurp him. It's irrational that magi from the East (and we don't actually know how many of them there were) would leave their home and travel a great distance following a star in order to pay homage to a toddler. It's out of control that the wise men would bring such extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to a child.

It's unreasonable to think that a child born to a poor family living in an oppressed land could grow up to be the Messiah. It's irrational to think that a Messiah would live the life of an itinerant teacher, urging his followers to love one another and their enemies instead of helping them to overthrow the oppressive Roman rule. It's out of control to think that the Messiah would

die in agony on a cross, in the company of criminals, in order that we might have eternal life.

There's nothing reasonable, rational, or controlled about this story. People in the Bible do crazy things when they encounter Jesus. Some try to kill him. Some try to crown him. Meeting Jesus invites an extravagant response. The wise men traveled an incredible distance at great cost to themselves to bring him extravagant gifts. Maybe little Ferris offered Jesus the best gift he had: his exuberance. So he was off key. So he was too loud. So he was out of control. If it hadn't been for Ferris and his enthusiastic singing, I wouldn't remember anything about that Christmas pageant. It would have been orderly and controlled and completely unmemorable. Instead many of us have a memory of a young boy singing his heart out, boldly making a joyful noise, giving all of us the gift of laughter, giving Jesus the gift of himself. Frequently it is in the disruptions that a moment of grace is found.

How will Jesus disrupt our lives in this season of Epiphany? How will Jesus disrupt our lives in this new year? When he does, will we be able to throw off our need for order and control, not by trying to kill the Christ, as Herod did, but by giving ourselves to Christ extravagantly and irrationally, as the wise men did, as little Ferris did? When Jesus manifests himself in our lives, it can seem to be a disruption, and not always one we welcome. But if we can let go and give ourselves to him, we will find ourselves following, not a star to a house in Bethlehem, but the Son of God, who has already given himself extravagantly for us.