

January 8, 2006
Matthew 2:1-12
First Parish Church
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From Away

Some of you will remember the old *Bert & I* story about the hot air balloonist who comes to Maine to tour the countryside in his balloon. After a while he becomes disoriented and wonders where he is. Seeing a farmer in the field below, he brings the balloon down to shouting distance and yells, “Where am I?” To which the farmer responds, “In a balloon you darn fool.” Those of you who know this story know that darn is a variation on the original word.

Who we are has connections with where we are and where we are from. I have now lived half my years in Maine, and half in other places including New Jersey, California, and Arizona. I remember when I first moved to Arizona, when people would ask, “Where you from?” I’d catch myself answering, “Well, I live in Phoenix, but I’m from Maine.”

It’s interesting how deeply ingrained those roots have been for me. This past week I learned how far back some of those roots go.

This past Wednesday was my maternal grandmother’s 100th birthday. She is no longer living, but my parents and I spent the day remembering her life and pouring over some genealogical records for her side of the family.

My grandmother, Edna Gertrude Look Frye, was born in the family farmhouse in Addison, Maine. Addison is in Washington County. The Primmers have a place there. As we perused the records, I realized that one line of my grandmother’s family traces back five generations right there in Addison. They were native Addisonians. They were also native Mainers before there even was a state of Maine.

At one point however, someone had to move to Addison. In this case it was Daniel Look, who moved in the 1700’s from what is now Massachusetts to the part of Massachusetts that become Maine. Tracing back from him, we came to a Thomas Look who came from England or Scotland to Massachusetts in the mid 1600’s.

Any of us if we go back far enough come to someone who was from away. In fact, a good many of us sitting here today are the first ones in our families who moved to Brunswick, Topsham, Bowdoin, Bowdoinham, Harpswell, ... and in some cases the first ones to move to Maine. My father was the first one on his side of the family to move to Maine.

I always thought it was interesting that my father had lived in Maine longer than I had but because he was not born here he was “from away.”

Growing up in the small town of Waldoboro, which is about an hour north of here on Rt. 1, I was sensitized to the dynamics regarding those of us who were native and those “from away.” Looking back on it I realize this sentiment seemed more prominent in the summer time when Maine has so many vacation visitors. My sense was that people were generally glad to have summer visitors come, especially if they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. Come fall, though, those who lived here were also glad to see those visitors return home by the same way – over the Kittery Bridge.

So what does this have to do with today’s story? Well, in the Christmas stories, who is more “from away” than the magi. They looked different, wore different clothes, used a different language, had a different mode of transportation, and a different way of searching for meaning among the stars. They were different everything – except they too were searching for God and they too sensed the presence of the holy in the little one in the manger.

Today if they were visiting dignitaries, coming to celebrate a special birth, there would be months of planning ahead of time – passports, cross-cultural protocol plans, an itinerary posted on a special web site, special agents to handle the security arrangements, and with global positioning systems they wouldn’t have to stop to ask directions.

Ah, but first century Palestine was a different time and place. The story says that the magi from the east simply followed a star. Since they were learned, wealthy, and influential they didn’t just stop at the local camel

watering hole for directions, they went right to King Herod to find out what was going on.

However, Herod is unaware of God’s work right beneath his very nose. He has heard nothing of a new “king of the Jews.” From the very beginning in Matthew’s gospel we see the tension that Jesus’ presence will bring to the political sphere. Jesus’ presence will not be simply a religious matter. Herod wants power and he wants it absolutely. He has no respect for religious diversity. But he is also shrewd and not wanting to play his cards, he gives the magi directions to Bethlehem and invites them to return with news of what they have found.

So with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh the magi arrive in Bethlehem. How many of them were there? The story doesn’t say. But when you are doing Christmas pageants it works well to have one magi for each of the three gifts.

These magi are definitely from away. They are gentiles – the term the Jews used to refer to everyone else. These magi are the gentiles of all gentiles and yet they are welcome at the side of the Christ Child. Through their presence we are reminded that the good news of great joy is for all the people – Jew and Gentile.

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There is another aspect of being from away in this story that has to do with Jesus himself. The early followers gathered around Jesus were themselves Jews. After the crucifixion and resurrection, they began telling others about him and witnessing to their

conviction that in him they had met God. Not surprisingly, people would ask them who this Jesus was and where was he from. When the disciples said he was from Nazareth, those hearing about him for the first time might have responded, “Oh, he’s from away.” In fact one person is recorded in the gospel of John (1:46) as saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Nazareth was a little hole in the wall village, and it was in Galilee. It’s in Gentile territory. It’s not Judea. It’s not Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish world in those days.

This concern about where Jesus was from may have played a role in the development of the Christmas stories. Most scholars believe that Mark was the earliest of our four gospels. Have you ever noticed that there is no Christmas story in Mark? Apparently, questions about where Jesus was from and about his parentage were not crucial questions at the time Mark was written.

However, by the time of Luke and Matthew, these questions have become more important. In both of these gospels, we find Christmas stories, which although they are quite different from each other, each designate Bethlehem as Jesus’ birthplace. Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem. It is in Judea. And it is the city of King David. This puts Jesus in the inner circle of the Jewish landscape and the Jewish lineage.

In other words, these gospels assert that Jesus was both native – born in Bethlehem – and from away – growing up in Nazareth. Indeed, something very good did come out of Nazareth.

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Here at First Parish, as in every church, we are a mixture of native folk and folk from away. I realize that sometimes those of us from away are puzzled by what those who have always lived here think is so important, and vice versa. Sometimes we step on each other’s toes and often don’t even know it. Sometimes we forget to truly listen to what the other has to say. As Yogi Berra might advise, “It’s amazing what you can hear when you listen.

Being a mixture of people who don’t always know each other instinctively does produce tension, but it also brings a multitude of gifts and experiences that deepen our life together. Through those who have spent their whole lives here, we are enriched by the heritage we have inherited in this time and this place. Through those who have moved here – coming to us through the military base, Bowdoin College, the growing retirement communities in the midcoast area, and other connections – our perspective is expanded.

Yet, ultimately, what binds us together isn’t where we are or even where we are from. What binds us together is the one in the manger.

In Christ Jesus, we are
Neither Jew nor Gentile
Neither shepherd nor magi
Neither native nor from away.
We are one in Christ Jesus.