

Religion, Magic, and Prayer

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“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” – Matthew 2:2

I said to you a few weeks ago, and not for the first time, that I would someday have to preach a sermon on prayer and magic, and today is that day. In order to do so, I realized that I have to speak also about religion, because how we pray can often make us look more like we're practicing magic rather than religion. So I need to preach about religion, magic, and prayer, and I have taken as my text for this sermon on these three very large and very complicated topics the second verse of the second chapter of Matthew's gospel, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”

The “we,” of course, are the magi, plural of the Latin *magus*, and source of our word “magic.” So the magi, whom we all love, is a logical place to begin thinking about magic, which is why I've taken their only speaking line as my text for this sermon. The only thing the magi say in their story is that they have come to pay homage to the child-king of the Jewish people. Hang onto that, because I'm going to return to it.

We are also celebrating communion this morning, which is a perfect occasion to speak about the differences between religion, magic, and prayer, because it was a misunderstanding of the Latin mass – specifically the Latin words “*Hoc est corpus meum*,” “This is my body” – that gave us the famous words of disparagement, “hocus-pocus.” Hang onto the role that prayer plays in communion because I'm going to return to that, too.

So it's obvious that religion, magic, and prayer have always been closely associated in some people's minds. In fact, in many people's minds, there's no difference between religion, magic, and prayer – it's all magic as far as they're concerned, and it's all bogus. All illusion. All superstition. All hocus-pocus.

One person's superstition is another person's religion, and that's the first thing I'd like to suggest to you about religion and magic. From an outsider's perspective, there is little difference between them. Both appear to be attempts to manipulate supernatural power through ritual acts. But as in so many cases, appearances can be deceiving.

Look at our first lesson from the book of Exodus. It's a contest between Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew people – and our God – and Pharaoh, the stiff-necked ruler of Egypt, who has, as part of his royal court, a bevy of magicians. Moses and Aaron have gone to Pharaoh demanding the release of their people from slavery, and Pharaoh, quite sensibly, has refused. And why wouldn't he? What ruler in his right mind would get rid of his work force for all those tasks that the Egyptians found onerous or ritually defiling or beneath their dignity? The Egyptians treated the Hebrews differently than they treated their own people because they could. They could mistreat them because they were an ethnic minority. That's the way slave labor functioned in the ancient world. It's the way ethnic minorities

were treated then, and it's the way they're treated now. Have you paid attention to the folks who make up the bulk of our menial, low-paid labor force – the aides in assisted living facilities, the orderlies in hospitals, the janitors in schools and churches, the people serving fast food? Pay attention to who's serving and who's being served then ask yourself much the world has changed in some of its most crushing fundamentals.

But back to the earlier form of slavery. We know the story of the exodus. The Hebrew people are being exploited, they cry out to God for deliverance, and God answers their prayer. As a sign of that answer, Moses is instructed to instruct his brother, Aaron, to use his shepherd's staff to bring frogs up out of the Nile onto the land, and plague Pharaoh and his people if Pharaoh refuses to let the Hebrews go. Of course, Pharaoh refuses, and Aaron brings on the plague of frogs. The problem is, as the text says, "But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt" (8:7).

So purely from an external point of view, what Aaron and Moses are doing and what the court magicians of Egypt are doing look a lot alike. It's had to distinguish a true believer from a magician if you're only looking at the externals. So you have to look deeper. You have to look at motives.

And that's the second point I want to make about the difference between religion and magic: genuine religion has always been motivated by universal interest, whereas magic has always been motivated by self-interest.

Let's go to another well-known text about the Hebrew people, the call of Abraham and Sarah, in Genesis 12. Some folks have pounced on this text with its idea of chosenness to denounce religion as parochial, narrow, tribal, and self-interested. We're the chosen people and you're not. Our group against your group, and God is on our side. We have the truth and you don't. That sort of reading of the text.

And there's certainly no way I or anybody else can prevent someone from reading the Bible as a parochial text. If you want to read the Bible as a text that promotes self-interest and divisiveness, you'll find plenty of ammunition for you to do so.

But the call of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12, the foundational text, as it were, for the idea of God choosing people in this world, says unambiguously that the Hebrew people were chosen for the world's benefit, not for their benefit: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, *so that you will be a blessing*. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; *and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*" (12:1-3).

Judaism, the foundation of which is rooted in the call of Abraham and Sarah, never saw itself as an end in itself. It was always itself for others. Yes, the Jewish people will be blessed as part of their mission – being called by God is a blessing in itself – but the blessing never stops with the one who has been blessed. That's the biblical teaching on blessing. You always pay blessing forward. You always give blessing back. You don't stop the blessing, store it up for yourself and your loved ones, and use it to the disadvantage of others. That is not how the Bible understands blessing.

And that's not how the Bible understands the blessing of abilities that some people have that others don't have. Let's briefly re-enter the world of Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh's magicians, where people seem to have the power to summon frogs from the Nile.

The point is not whether they could do it; the text accepts that they both could, and if we entangle ourselves in the weeds of historicity, we're going to miss the point of the text. The point of the text is that Aaron and Moses are using whatever special power they have to free people from

oppression, whereas Pharaoh's court magicians are using their power to keep people in that oppression. There is a big difference.

And if the Egyptians had treated their Hebrew foreign workers with the respect and dignity that all people deserve for their labor, they wouldn't be in the spot they're in, according to the narrative. You recall how this narrative begins?

“Now there arose up a king over Egypt which knew not Joseph. . . . And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour; and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage” (1:8, 13).

When you make the lives of others bitter so that you can live comfortably, expect trouble, according to the Bible. That's a system of exploitation that merits punishment. The Egyptians brought all those creepy, crawly, icky plagues upon themselves by being stiff-necked and perverse in their devotion to their own comfort, and their willingness to make others suffer on their behalf. There's a lesson in that old story for all of us, if we'll hear it.

Religion has, at its heart, an ethical core that magic lacks. Religion has a perspective that includes the well-being of the other that is lost in magic's self-interest. Any set of words, any gestures, any rules, any rituals, any costume, any amulets, any potions, any requirements – anything at all that sets one group over another and seeks to manipulate the divine for narrow self-interest is magic, it's not religion. That's the second point I want to make to distinguish religion and magic: genuine religion is universal in its scope, magic is limited to the magician's narrow world.

Finally, the third thing I want to say this morning about religion, magic, and prayer is that religion and prayer are attempts at communication, not manipulation. Magic is not that; magic is an attempt to manipulate the supernatural toward the magician's ends.

Religion and prayer are attempts to communicate, and communication means that we listen as well as speak. Look again at the quote on the front of this morning's bulletin.

This is common sense, as much of religion is. Most of you are married or have been married, most of you with children. You know from your own experience that if one person does all the talking in a family, that family is going to have problems. That marriage is going to have problems. Any relationship is going to have problems if there's only talking and not listening.

Many political commentators have suggested that one of the reasons the 2016 presidential election turned out as it did was because large swaths of Americans felt that they weren't being listened to. Their leaders were doing a lot of talking, and a lot of spending, but they weren't listening to what was actually happening to ordinary people trying to live ordinary lives. Life for increasing numbers of people wasn't ordinary anymore; it was a struggle, and life isn't supposed to be a struggle. It can and will have its challenges, of course, but that's quite different from unrelenting struggle simply to keep from falling into poverty. For many people, the dream of struggling to get ahead has devolved into the nightmare of struggling just to stay afloat. Something's wrong and we know it.

And we pray for an end to that way of life not with the expectation that we can somehow manipulate God into granting us relief – if we pray with just the right words, if we get enough people to pray at the same time in the same place on the same day, or if we would just return to church and act like it's the 1950s again God will hear us – no, we don't pray with those expectations, but we do pray with the firm belief that submission to God's will has the power to relieve us from many of our distresses, because submission to God's will means that we are listening to God and not to ourselves.

When we listen for God's voice we are listening for the voice of justice and peace and righteousness and love and mercy and understanding and wisdom – not just for ourselves and those we love, but for all creation – and when you listen for that voice, and when you are willing to act on the

basis of what you're hearing from that voice, life gets better. That's a fact. It's a fact, as the late Paul Wellstone used to say, that we all do better when we all do better.

And so I return to my text, which is about the submission of astrologers to God's will by paying homage to the child-king of the Jews. Those star-gazers, so full of their own special powers to read the heavens, came to pay their respects to the one whose God created those heavens. They were magi, but they were not magicians. They did not allow their insight, their devotion to their texts, their years of learning, or their observations of the heavens to degenerate into self-serving magic. They came to pay homage to the one born king of the people who believed themselves to be chosen by God to help the world be a blessing to itself.

So listen in a few minutes – listen very carefully – to the words I will say as part of our communion liturgy. Listen to the words that we have inherited from centuries of Christian worship, and listen for the ways in which I have adapted those words to fit our church. Listen for the echoes of Scripture in this central ritual of the Christian church. Listen to how much of our communion liturgy is prayer. Listen, as Elizabeth has urged us to do in our midweek program, with heart as well as mind. Listen and pray, and ask what God might be saying to you in response.