

# A Camel on the Roof

Matthew 2:1-12 | 1/8/2011

Perhaps you are familiar with the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*? Well, today we draw from a different faith tradition – not Jewish or Christian but Muslim – for a story about a *Camel on the Roof*.

The story concerns a king named Ebrahim ibn Adam. Ebrahim was wealthy according to every earthly measure. At the same time, however, he sincerely and restlessly strove to be spiritually wealthy as well. He was truly a seeker after God.

One night the king was roused from sleep by the sound of loud stumping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: 'Who's there?' 'A friend,' came the reply from the roof. 'I've lost my camel.' Perturbed by such stupidity, Ebrahim shouted: 'You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?' 'You fool!' the voice from the roof answered. 'Are you looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a golden bed?' " The story goes on to tell how these simple words filled the king with such inspiration that he arose from his sleep to become a most remarkable saint.

The camel on the roof story raises the Epiphany question, "Where are you looking for God?" This question comes, appropriately, at the beginning of a new year. God is not to be found where the world's princes and powers reside. We are called to be like the king's friend, willing to make a fool of ourselves, asking the camel-on-the-roof question to a world busy seeking God in all the wrong places.

Our gospel text tells of the magi coming to visit Jesus at the time of his birth. The magi, or wise men described in this week's text, were probably Persian astronomers and astrologers - not magicians with some other worldly powers, but experts with special knowledge. In fact the magi initially act like fools themselves: apparently completely unaware of the personal and political turmoil their presence and message would bring to Herod. The magi come to Jerusalem first, expecting to find the king they seek in that appropriate location. Herod, whose ruling power was based in Jerusalem, would obviously find the magi's questions about this new king extremely disturbing. Yet they are outspoken and naively honest with Herod about all they know. It is not until verse 12 that the magi, specially tutored by God in a dream, understand the workings of the real world and the dangers it presents. They were as "innocent as doves." Now as they return to their own land secretly they are at last "wise as serpents."

It is hardly surprising that these men, following the star of a king, of a new, powerful ruler, chose to journey to Jerusalem first. Jerusalem had long been the home of those who shaped the destiny of the land around them. And yet Bethlehem is only a few miles from Jerusalem - a suburb of the grander city, in today's geography. But despite its apparently humble status, all Judea knew the heritage of Bethlehem which made it special - her intimate connection to the royal lineage of Israel, her heritage as the birthplace of kings, in particular King David, the great Hero/King of Hebrew history and legend. Herod was also aware of this history, and thus took seriously the threat of a new ruler arising from that tiny town. Significantly it is Herod, the most traditionally powerful figure in this story, who trembles the most violently when confronting the possibility of a new and different kind of threat to his security.

Where did the magi look for God? Understandably, they first sought the "king" at the palace. But they did not find him there. God often appears in unexpected places, and in unexpected ways. The magi point us to where the world's best hope, the world's only salvation comes: bowing before the Christ who is found and served in a humble home in a humble town.

There is another Arabic story about "Seventeen Camels". It tells of a man who died and left his seventeen camels to be divided among his three sons. One was to receive one ninth; one was to get one half; and the third son was to inherit one third of the camels. Seventeen camels, however, aren't evenly divisible by three or two.

So the three sons argued loud and long about what to do. In desperation they agreed to let a certain wise man decide for them.

He was seated in front of his tent with his own camel staked out back. After hearing the case, the wise man took his own camel and added it to the other seventeen camels. He then took one ninth of the eighteen, or two camels, and gave them to one son. To another he gave one half, or nine camels. To the third he gave one third, or six camels. On top of it all, he still had his own camel left.

So what do we learn from this story? Well, just as the magi found the Messiah in an unexpected place, so God often points us in the direction of unexpected solutions to life's problems and challenges.

Many of us try to find God and solve the problems of life by logical, calculating schemes that insure we receive our share. We argue and fight to ensure that "we get our fair share", much like the three brothers. But God is to be found in receiving, not grasping; in giving, not claiming our rights. It is only when the brothers receive the gift of the wise man's camel that they are able to resolve their situation. It is only because of his generosity that they can finally inherit what their father intended for them to have.

Does that ring any bells? A loving father wants his children to receive blessings. But the children are too busy arguing over who gets how much to find a way that anyone can get anything at all! And it is only through another act of generosity that the intentions of the loving father are realized.

Does that sound a little like the story of a God who creates a wonderful world for the creatures he loves. But it is a world that is quickly fractured, polluted and distorted by the greed, selfishness and foolishness of his creatures. They spend so much energy fighting and arguing that they can't seem to find solutions to any of their problems. (Is that hard to believe in this, and election year?)

And yet the loving father doesn't give up.

As we enter a new year, one thing is sure: many people are trying to find a way to God by climbing the ladders of success, status and power. The pursuit of money and power is and always has been one of the most powerful mystery religions ever to show its face in the history of humanity.

This makes it all the more imperative that the Good News is that God is found in incarnation, in the humility of birth in a stable. As startling as a camel on a roof is the Christian message that the vulnerability of a life of homelessness, and the suffering of death on a cross, are heralded as marks of God's most powerful work in the human life.

---

## **Animating Illustrations**

Those in power are continually seeking new ways to consolidate their positions. Despite public perception and media hype, it is a surprising fact that of the handguns in America, 88 percent are owned by whites, only 6 percent owned by blacks.

---

"A remarkable Hasidic rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev in the Ukraine, used to say that he had discovered the meaning of love from a drunken peasant. The rabbi was visiting the owner of a tavern in the Polish countryside. As he walked in, he saw two peasants at a table. Both were gloriously in their cups. Arms around each other, they were protesting how much each loved the other. Suddenly Ivan said to Peter: 'Peter, tell me, what hurts me?' Bleary-eyed, Peter looked at Ivan: 'How do I know what hurts you?' Ivan's answer was swift: 'If you don't know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?'"

--Walter Burghardt,  
Still Proclaiming Your Wonders  
(New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 111.

---

Three executives were defining what status means, and how to know when you have really arrived. One said: "I'll tell you what real status is. It's being invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President." Another replied: "No, that's not it. You know you have arrived when you've been invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President, the hot line rings, and he just looks at it and decides not to answer it." The third executive said: "You both have it all wrong. Real status is when you are invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President, the hot line rings, the President answers it and says, 'Here, it's for you.' "

---

Did you ever wonder why old houses have so few closets? It's mostly because people then didn't have so many things.

"Remember how many closets you have. They are for storing things you aren't using. In my house, we have six closets, and we'd like to add a coat closet. In addition to our six closets, we also have a basement. And a shed. And a pantry. All pretty full.

"What is your attitude toward possessions if your closets are bursting with things you don't use while kids starve by the thousands?"

--John Alexander,  
Your Money or Your Life  
(San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 49.

---

"The knowledge of God is very far from the love of God."  
-- Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* (1670)

---

Pulitzer prize-winning author Robert Coles is probably the world's most respected child psychologist. In his 1989 book *Harvard Diary*, he relates a conversation with one of the servers in the food line of the Harvard Faculty Club. This server reminds us that the movers and shakers of the world are not always the easiest to serve.

"I see lots of good folk here, kids trying to learn all they can, and teachers trying to teach the best they can; but there's lots of big-shot, stuffed shirt folks here, and boy, do they sell themselves hard, and boy, do they do lots of strutting and conniving, and boy, are they the worst to go near and try to serve."

--Harvard Diary  
(New York: Crossroad, 1988), 204.

But Jesus did not go to those who wanted or praised him the most. He went to those who needed him the most. In Luke 10:37, Jesus did not say "Believe thou likewise." Jesus said "Do thou likewise."

---

"Woe unto me if I remain silent. For it would be better for me to die than not to take a stand against great wickedness, as this would make me an accomplice to sin and hell."

--Words by John Huss inscribed on the wall  
of the Czechoslovakian National Museum of Literature

---

Mark Trotter, First United Methodist Church, San Diego, tells a true story of a local college professor who taught freshman English. To the entering class he assigned a 500-word paper on the topic: "Why are you attending college?" He encouraged them to be candid and straightforward, but the results were nevertheless unexpected. Paper after paper seemed to have been written by a machine: college was a means to an end of success, status, prosperity and security. Only two papers stood out, dramatically different in spirit and content from the others. These papers talked about college enabling the writers to do something with their lives that would be good for the world, that would better the planet, and that would serve others better. The professor was at first encouraged, because it only takes two to make a difference. But then he became mightily disturbed. Both students who authored these papers were not from the United States. The students who sought service over status, success and security were from Angola and Lebanon.

---

Wesley, an old man in Cleveland, Ohio, was found dead in his bed by his neighbors. Surrounding Wesley's body were rifles, pistols and guns; a harpoon was propped up against the refrigerator. That's all that the refrigerator was good for, however, as the old man had spent his entire retirement income, including all of his Social Security checks, on the security of guns. The refrigerator was absolutely empty. He had starved to death.