

Guest Editorial: Great things in small packages

December 17, 2015

On the night Jesus was born, a strange new star appeared in the western sky. Some mystics who watched the stars noticed its appearance. They studied it and wondered together. An ancient prophecy said a star like this would appear as a sign of a new king's birth, and so they set off through forests and deserts and across mountains, valleys and rivers to find the king the star signified.



Eric BlackTwo years later, they arrived in Jerusalem, looking for a new king whose sign was a star. The current king, obviously worried, wanted to know what all of this meant. He called his own mystics together, and they told him a new king, a Messiah, would be born in Bethlehem.

In Bethlehem! Could anything important come from Bethlehem?

The ancient prophet wrote: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6).

Oh, sleepy little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Could anything important come out of you, sleepy little town of Bethlehem?

Just six miles from Jerusalem, Bethlehem was a small agricultural town of 200 to 1,000 people. They grew wheat and barley and herded sheep, and sometimes they housed pilgrims headed to Jerusalem.

Other than being the birthplace of King David, Bethlehem had no claim to fame. No one went to Bethlehem. They all just passed through on their way to Jerusalem.

Bethlehem ... and small towns everywhere

Sounds a lot like where I live, Covington, and so many other little towns.

William Least Heat-Moon, an acclaimed travel writer, tells a story in *Blue Highways* about a sleepy little town between Austin and Brenham called Dime Box. William stopped into the post office to buy stamps and to ask how the town got its name. The postmaster explained the name and the ethnic heritage of the area. When William asked how people got along, she said they got along pretty well, that even the busing fuss was more about which family would be in control than it was about ethnicity.

William exclaimed, “Busing in Dime Box,” to which the postmaster responded: “City people don’t think anything important happens in a place like Dime Box. And usually it doesn’t, unless you call conflict important. Or love or babies or dying.”

Conflict, love, babies & dying

Could anything important come out of Bethlehem? Perhaps, if you call conflict important, or love or babies or dying.

But then as now, it’s the big places that get all the attention. It’s the big places where all the truly noteworthy things happen. The big places of the world—like Dallas and Austin and Houston, like New York and LA and London—that’s where the important people do important things.

Perhaps, but none of it more important than conflict or love or babies or dying.

We're told love came to us on that night when the star appeared. We're told God came to us to live with us, our Lord, Immanuel. We're told God so loved the world he sent his only Son that night, and God's only Son was born as all humans are, with pain and groans, with blood and fluids, and with cries. That is how God's love came to us.

Out-of-the-way, yet nearby

Even more, God's love came to us in a small, out-of-the-way ag town in the shadow of the big city. Even more, God's love came to us in a small, out-of-the-way animal pen in that small, out-of-the-way ag town. Even more, God's love came to us through an unwed girl who very likely wanted to stay out of the way and out of the lights of the big city.

No, nothing about God's love for us made headlines. No, God's love came to us in such an ordinary way angels had to break open the sky to get anyone's attention, and the only ones there to see the angels were a bunch of yard hands watching sheep.

One Christmas when I was young, I opened a present from my grandparents. It was a smallish box but really heavy for its size. I peeled back the paper and opened the box to find, of all things, a brick! Who in the world gets a brick for Christmas? Who in the world gives a brick for Christmas?

As I started to close the box, as I sorted out what to say and how to feel, my parents encouraged me to keep looking in the box. I thought they were as crazy as my grandparents, but I kept looking. It was a tight fit, that brick in that box. Where else could I look? "Take the brick out," they said.

And under the brick was a check for no small amount.

Love “hidden in the ordinary”

Yes, love comes to us like that. Love comes to us hidden in the ordinary. Love comes to us as a gift we can choose against. Love comes to us as a gift we can ignore.

So, when love comes to us as a small, insignificant baby born to poor, insignificant, unwed people in a backwater, insignificant town, we who equate significance with glitz and glamour and significance with how much attention it draws may just miss love. We may take one look at the brick and close the box.

Can anything important come out of Covington? Sure, if you call conflict important. Or love or babies or dying. We have experienced all of these things this year. Is it possible God’s love for us is wrapped up somewhere in our conflicts or in our babies or in someone’s dying?

Conflict, love, babies and dying—all of that happened one night in another sleepy little town many years ago when a star appeared in the sky and angels herded the shepherds to the manger and far-off mystics started out on their two-year journey bearing small packages fit for a king.

Yes, great things do come in small packages—sometimes plain, boring, insignificant packages. Open them. Look all the way through. God’s love is so often hidden inside.

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