

#### THE PROCLAIMED WORD

I love *The Nanny*...it's a television program that was popular in the 1990's on CBS and all six seasons of the show are constantly repeated even still on cable television. What is fascinating about the program is that it borrows shamelessly from previous series in the canon of American television and film. For instance, the idea that a simple, folksy, charming, and wise if not learned woman with no child-rearing experience would become the governess to difficult children who had gone through a plethora of nannies since their mother's death is a plot line taken right from *The Sound of Music*. But the writers and producers of *The Nanny* take that familiar theme and rework it into a brilliant comedy that continues to entertain people a decade after the series ended.

Of course, if you have ever watched *The Nanny*, you also know that the lead actor, Fran Drescher mimics the over the top clowning style of Lucille Ball from *I Love Lucy*. She also refers frequently to other classic television series such as the *Dick van Dyke Show*, *Gilligan's Island*, and *That Girl*. It's comedy, its pop culture, its history.

*The Nanny* isn't unique in its skilled way of borrowing old story lines and weaving them into something new. *The Flintstones* are an obvious knock off of *The Honeymooners*. *The Simpsons* broadcast features a mayor who sounds like John or Bobby Kennedy, and a police chief who mimics Edward G. Robinson. *Family Guy* is a New England version of *The Simpsons*. And how many different ways can Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* be told? Taking a story and re-working it, reapplying it, reclaiming it is a well established practice, and we find it not only on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century American television, but also in the ancient documents that make up our bible.

Over and over in the bible, we see themes and symbols reused, recast, re-examined. The number seven keeps popping up, and the number 40, and 12 also. Dead people are brought back to life in several stories. People are miraculously cured by being touched by a prophet or a disciple or an angel. A prophet takes a few loaves of bread in 2 Kings chapter 4 and multiplies them. We see that miracle being repeated in the gospels. Angelic visitations happen before the births of remarkable people, from Samson to John the Baptizer to Jesus. The image of the Human One or Son of Humanity, Son of Man in the King James text first shows up in the book of Daniel but is reintroduced and reinterpreted in the synoptic gospels. Lady Wisdom from the book of Proverbs gets blended with the ancient Greek Logos concept and shows up in a hymn that opens the fourth gospel.

A story that is well known inspires a new story and in this new way the ancient message is heard again, in a new way, for a new audience. Borrowing and reapplying story lines is an age old practice.

Matthew employs this same technique in communicating Good News to his community. You see, Julius Caesar adopted his nephew, who later ruled as Augustus Caesar. Julius was honored as a deity in the Imperial cult, and when he died, his adopted son, Augustus, was considered a divine son, the son of a god. In 44 B.C.E., during funeral games memorializing Julius Caesar after his death, a comet was supposedly observed in the sky...a falling star. Some people imagined the event to be a sign that Julius had taken his place in the heavens as an eternal divine presence watching over Rome. The divine Julius had been resurrected and even ascended into the heavens where he would always be with his empire. Those images will resurface in the Jesus story, and not by accident.

The story of Julius' star would have been in circulation for more than 100 years by the time Matthew is writing his gospel. So, to take a well known story about a star in the heavens representing the deified Julius Caesar and to reshape it into a story of a star that leads to Jesus – someone we recognize as the symbol of what it means to be a Child of OUR God, someone

Rome executed as an enemy of the state...well, you see how bold a move it was. Matthew isn't making the story up, he's borrowing a tradition and adapting it to serve and empower and uplift his community. He is taking a story, and making it HIS story and the story of HIS people...once we see ourselves in a story, it becomes our story and as our story it can then encourage, enlighten, or empower us for our journeys.

But Matthew doesn't just borrow the story of Caesar's memorial star. He also borrows an image from his own sacred tradition. He remembers the story of his ancestors escaping from bondage in Egypt. And as they traveled, the story in Exodus 13 tells us, God preceded them...by day as a cloud of smoke, and by night as pillar of fire. The fiery star in the sky guides the magi at night just as the pillar of fire had guided the children of Israel in the sacred stories Matthew had inherited.

And Matthew must have had the prophetic literature in mind also as he weaves this tale. One of the contributors to the book of Isaiah writes, "Rise up in splendor! Your light has come, and the glory of the Lord shines upon you." That same contributor to the book of Isaiah also imagined God saying, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

And so with the story of Caesar rising to the heavens to shine upon his empire, and with the story of a fiery light guiding people to hope and freedom, and with the prophetic promise that all people are included in the love of God, Matthew puts pen to paper to represent these ideas in a new story and in a fresh way.

In Matthew's story, it is the Other that is affirmed. Jesus is born of an unwed mother during difficult days. And yet, this unlikely infant is the expression of God's love for all people! Matthew even drives that point home by giving us Jesus' genealogy...a genealogy that includes Tamar who posed as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law. It includes Rahab the prostitute, and Ruth from Moab ...a country that was considered the enemy of the Jewish nation. Jesus' ancestry includes Bathsheba who conceived Solomon with King David while she was still married to Uriah; and finally there is his mother Mary who becomes pregnant in a way that more cynical people even in the first century would have questioned. Jesus' lineage even includes Ruth's second husband Boaz, a man I believe with all my heart to have been gay.

Jesus is the Other...one born in humble circumstances, even controversial circumstances, and his lineage is filled with stories of unlikely heroes loved by God, chosen by God, used by God. Even Jesus' family tree is a testimony of how God loves the people society says are unlovable!

And then this Jesus...born of an unwed mother, descended from people who could never make the social register is the one whom we are to call God's Anointed? And in Matthew's version of events, who discovers this Jesus? Magi...practitioners of the occult arts, astrologers who read signs in the sky that tell them that a special baby has entered the world...and they follow a divine light, like the children of Israel had done, to discover and to embrace and adore and share gifts with this unlikely fulfillment of a divine promise. The Other, the outcasts, the Queer, the unlikely and unlovable and unacceptable...these are God's people...God's chosen people, the people for whom God seems to have a preference. If God has a preferential option for anyone, it is for those who have been excluded, wounded, left out, vilified, or forgotten...or so Matthew would have us believe.

And finally, to protect the young Jesus from the government that did in fact execute him when he was a young man, the magi take an alternate route home. As the people they were, outsiders, Others, practitioners of ANOTHER religion, residents of ANOTHER country, members of ANOTHER culture, just as they were they find the light that we call Christ and they returned, just as they were, to their lives. The magi didn't stop being magi, but by being the best possible magi they are blessed and they take their blessing home with them. By being their authentic selves, they found the same light that we find in Christ...that is a perfect picture of the unconditional and all-inclusive love of God.

Oh, Matthew can tell a story! He can take the story of Caesar's star, and Isaiah's promise that God's house excludes no one, and the story of the Exodus where fire in the sky leads people to a place of hope and healing, and he weaves those elements into his own story about an unlikely, humble baby, born to difficult circumstances, but who was nothing less than the Child of God.

Where is God when discrimination stings? Where is God when illness threatens? Where is God when violence strikes? Where is God in the moment of betrayal? Where is God when the money runs out? Where is God in the lonely night? Where is God when it hurts? According to Matthew, that is exactly where God is...in the difficult place, in the painful place, in the lonely place, in the unlikely place. The unwed, homeless, teenage mother gives birth to the presence of God. The traveling foreigners who risk their lives for the search find and bear witness to the presence of God. The social pariah and outcast contributes to the lineage of the embodiment of God. God is there to be discovered by whomever will search...no one gets left out. The love of God is right in the difficult moment, waiting to be discovered, and waiting to fill our lives with hope and healing again. This is the Epiphany of our story, and...  
This is the Good News! Amen.

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#### THE AFFIRMED WORD

Wherever I am, God is!  
Wherever I look, God is.  
God is omnipresent.  
In God's presence, I am blessed.  
I am comforted.  
I am strengthened.  
I am renewed.  
And so it is!

#### THE FINAL WORD

"We have what we seek, it is there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us." – Thomas Merton