

OPEN AND CLOSED

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

Many commentaries on this episode in Matthew's gospel point out that while we cannot say for certain who or what the magi, or wise men, were; or pinpoint exactly where they came from, or even how many there were—still, it is clear that in Matthew's scheme they represent the Gentiles who are drawn to the light of Christ and to whom Christ is revealed.

We call this part of our Christmas celebration Epiphany because it represents Jesus being revealed to the wider world. And the important thing here is not to draw a contrast between Jewish and Gentile, but to show how this story is opening up beyond the city limits of Bethlehem, beyond the borders of Israel. This is not a closed story.

The world of Herod and his henchmen in Jerusalem, however, was a closed world. It centered around a king who saw his power as both absolute and ultimate. It was a self-sufficient world, and not open to a word from the outside, not open to a new revelation. And this makes Herod protective and fearful and calculating. He can see no further than his own self-contained world and he is committed to preserving the status quo. His world is so much a closed world, that when he is confronted with what he considers a threat to his power and control, his whole world, all of Jerusalem, is caught up in his fear.

The magi, the wise men—whoever they were, wherever they came from—the magi start out in a kind of closed system. It was a system based on calculation. They use their knowledge of stars and astrology to locate the great city of Jerusalem, which their calculations led them to assume would be the most likely city for the birth of a new king.

But when they arrive in Jerusalem, we see that their world begins to open up. And it is opened up not by a new calculation, but by a word from the world outside of their closed system, a word of revelation from the Hebrew prophets. And it is this glitch in their calculations that leads them to an unexpected place, Bethlehem, where they find what they

were seeking, even though they could not have known what it was when they set out on their journey.

Ryan Bingham does not react very well to glitches in his calculations. His is a closed world in every respect. Ryan is the central character in a movie from 2009 called "Up in the Air," written and directed by Jason Reitman, a movie that deftly plays with the various shades of a closed system.

Ryan works for a company with the euphemistic name of "Career Transition Counseling." Which means he flies around the country to various corporate headquarters to conduct employee layoffs for executives who are too gutless to do it themselves. He is like some kind of corporate hired gunslinger.

But what is most fascinating about Ryan is not just his career, it is his lifestyle. "To know me," he says, "is to fly with me." He boasts that he spent 320 days of the last year in the air and the remaining miserable 45 days at home. He lives from hub to hub; his home, his whole world, is a variety of airport terminals, restaurants, bars, and hotel rooms. And, for all its variety of location, it is a closed world.

There is a remarkable sequence near the beginning of the movie which shows Ryan's daily routine of packing up in an airport hotel and making his way to his first-class seat on a plane. He knows exactly what to pack, how to pack it, how to make it available to security inspectors. In contrast to the sluggish lines and frustrating waits that most of us experience in airports, he moves briskly through each obstacle, with the precision of a Swiss watch. Everything is precisely calculated, down to which lines to avoid and which to choose at the security gate. Because of his perks, points, and platinum card privileges, there is no waiting, no interruptions, and no surprises. Without breaking his stride, he swipes his card at the check-in kiosk, and in a voice-over he says, "When I run my card the system prompts the desk clerk to greet me with this exact statement," and immediately we see and hear a smiling young lady say "Pleasure to see you again, Mr. Bingham." He adds, "It is these kinds of systemized friendly touches that keep my world in orbit."

It is, without doubt, a highly efficient world that Ryan lives in. But it is a world as cold and calculating and self-contained as the world of Herod's Jerusalem.

There are two subplots in this movie that call the notion of a closed system into question, from different sides. The first involves Natalie, a young new employee of Career Transition Counseling, who introduces an even more efficient layoff process which can be conducted by video from the company's headquarters in Omaha without the expense of sending people like Ryan out to do this face to face. But what I found most interesting about Natalie is not her impersonal system of firing people, it was the emotional meltdown she experiences when her fiancée dumps her while she is away, sending her the text-message equivalent of a Dear Jane letter.

In an airport bar, she explains to Ryan how she had visualized the rest of her life playing out. She had followed this guy to Omaha, turning down a better job in San Francisco because she had carefully calculated how their life would turn out, from the kind of cars they would drive, the clothes they would wear, the golden lab they would walk, right down to the perfect white teeth in the smile on her future husband's face. She is devastated not just by the callous way she is dumped by an insensitive jerk, but even more by the realization that there was a glitch in her calculations for a perfectly happy life.

On the other hand, in another subplot, Ryan reluctantly goes back to his home in Wisconsin to attend his sister's wedding. On the day of the wedding, her fiancée, Jim, suddenly

gets cold feet, and in an ironic twist, Ryan is called in to talk him into marriage. Using his best motivational speaker techniques, he argues that the most important moments in life are seldom spent alone, and convinces Jim to go through with the wedding.

But, again, what I found more interesting is Jim's rationale for balking at this commitment. He tells Ryan that while he was spending the previous night alone, he had time to think, and he visualized the rest of his life as a married person. He recites a litany of work and bills and mortgage and children and Christmas at the in-laws and grandchildren and aging and hair-loss and ultimately death. What makes him balk on his wedding day is that it all seems so predictable and pre-arranged and calculated—and in his eyes, meaningless.

In both of these sub-plots the characters react to what they see as a closed system. One is devastated when she discovers that her world is more open-ended and full of surprises than she calculated; the other is fearful and demoralized by the predictability and sameness of a seemingly closed world of marriage. All three of these characters, Ryan, Natalie and Jim are seeking a sense of security and prosperity through calculation, control, and self-sufficiency. And without giving away the story of the movie, it is safe to say that two of them find an alternative way home, a way that involves risk and vulnerability, a way that opens the self to the outside, to others.

The movie makes this discovery about closed systems in terms of the corporate world and interpersonal relationships. The Gospel of Matthew works in the larger arena of communities and nations and superpowers. But the discovery is the same. A closed system is based on the assumption of self-sufficiency. It doesn't allow for new life, a new word from the outside to break in. It settles into a kind of rigidity that ultimately solidifies into a kind of death, as hard and cold and lifeless as the ice on my sidewalk.

What is your vision of the world and our lives in it? Is it a closed world where everything has been settled once and for all and nothing is open to new direction, new revelation?

What is your vision of our church? Is it a closed system, a system of calculation, where we merely repeat the same programs, follow the same template, year after year? Or is it open to newness and transformation? Do we embrace change and transformation with eagerness, seeing it as God's on-going creative work through us? Or do we react with fear and retrenchment? Are we looking forward to this new year with openness and with generosity?

The magi's calculations were off by some 64 miles, but when they opened themselves up to a word from outside their world, they discovered something they didn't even know they were searching for until they found it. By changing their course they not only proceed on their journey, they embrace this change with eagerness. And in the end, their new way of openness transforms them into joyful, celebratory, generous people. They find a new way forward, and a new way home.

As we take the first steps on the journey of this new year, may we be open to discovery and maybe even a change of direction, open to new ways God may be leading us, in our personal lives, in our world, and in the life of our congregation.

May it be so.