

The Wise Ones

Matthew 2:1-12

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In some Christian traditions – Roman Catholic and Anglican, for instance – the *Feast of the Epiphany* is celebrated as one of seven principal feast days on the liturgical calendar. The Feast of the Epiphany is a fixed date – January 6, the twelfth day after Christmas. When you think twelfth day of Christmas think of the story of the wise men in the Bible rather than that popular song of the season about a partridge in a pear tree and all those French hens a’laying and lords a’leeping.

Epiphany occurs on our Presbyterian church calendar, too, though I suspect few of us will go out of our way to celebrate it next Wednesday. On this Sunday in worship, however, I have chosen to follow the readings for Epiphany and to bring to a logical and rich conclusion the whole Advent – Christmas – Epiphany journey we embarked on several weeks ago, mirroring, in a way, the fabled journey of those three kings from the East to Jerusalem.

In many parts of the world Epiphany is, in fact, a bigger holiday than Christmas, with rituals of gift giving tied to treasure-bearing wise men rather than the jolly old man in a red suit and whiskers. Our little ones often put cookies and milk near the fireplace for Santa, but in some other places in the world children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men who, in turn, leave gifts in the shoes for the children as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.

Though we are now in the lectionary year that features the Gospel of Luke, we must turn to Matthew for the story of the wise men because Matthew is the only Gospel that includes it. And that in itself is a bit of a curiosity. In a number of ways the story of the *magi* – a word from which we get our word *magic* – would seem more at home in Luke’s Gospel which stresses as a central theme the idea that Jesus is a savior not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. But for Matthew the magi fulfill the prophet Micah’s prophecy given in these familiar words: *But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.* The wise ones’ long trek following the star in the sky confirms that age-old promise for Matthew.

So one of the prominent themes of the story of Epiphany is the sharing of the gospel with the Gentiles. And, though the biblical story is rather sparse, early church fathers imaginatively reconstructed the physical characteristics of the three kings to represent different races and ethnicities known to the ancient world. In the seventh century after Christ the writer known as the Venerable Bede – don’t we all remember that guy from our early surveys of world literature? – first named three wise men. Matthew doesn’t number them, he just says “wise men” without counting them. The tradition would fill in the number three.

The Venerable Bede named his three kings Melchior (described as “an old man with white hair and a long beard”), Gaspar (who was “young and beardless and ruddy complexioned”), and Balthasar (“black-skinned and heavily bearded”). The poet also symbolically unpacked the three gifts Matthew names as being offered to the infant Jesus: *gold* suggesting a gift suitable for a “king,” *frankincense* symbolizing “an oblation worthy of divinity,” and *myrrh*, a bitter perfume, “testifying to the Son of Man who was to die.”

The rest, as they say, is history. Though I kept the kings at bay at 11:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve this year – anticipating our celebration of Epiphany this morning – every children’s Nativity pageant in history has included three or more wise ones in gaudy costume bearing gifts and kneeling before the

manger of the newborn Christ child. If, in fact, there really were wise ones from the mythical “East,” their journey on camel would have taken much more time than the shepherds’ quick trip down to the cattle stall from tending their flocks on the hills just outside that little town of Bethlehem.

There is a bit of delicious irony here when the story is viewed with contemporary eyes. The magi paying homage to the newborn king of the Jews would no doubt have come either from Persia – now Iran – or from Babylon – then an ancient city in Iraq. Those connections and that journey seem less likely now, but perhaps the prophet Isaiah’s call to repair the breaches in those human relationships will yet be realized. That, too, is part of the hope revived by the old, old stories giving shape and form to our Christmas narrative even now.

The story of the wise ones of old – their relentless quest to find the promised liberator of the human spirit at the end of the star’s journey – rekindles in us as well our souls’ restless seeking for the peace that surpasses all human understanding. As some contemporary biblical scholars have observed about the story of the wise men and other parts of the Christmas story, it’s all true and some of it is fact.

Fact or fiction, the story of the wise men tells us that through them we – that is, we Gentiles; we who were not born Jews – will come to know Christ not through our inheritance but through a new revelation that transcends any one tradition. Herod, who claims to be King of the Jews, seeks to destroy rather than worship the true king. The wise ones – and Matthew invites us all to be similarly *wise* – follow the star in the sky toward the true presence of God in human flesh. And when they find it, they fall down and worship God. They *fall down* in humility and awe in God’s presence, and that act suggests the proper response for us as well.

You see, the magi’s visitation and gifts portray for us the spirit of generosity with which we are invited to respond to God’s gift to us in the Christ child among us. As an expression of God’s infinite generosity, in which God actually gives of God’s self, there is no way we can offer anything in return to match the gift that has been given. Rather, the gifts of the magi are symbolic, even sacramental, but offerings signaling that disciples of Jesus are called to participate in God’s infinite generosity by giving ourselves to God and others freely. This theme of generosity is so important to Matthew that it is introduced already in the second chapter of the Gospel.

Our word *epiphany* is derived from the Greek *epiphaneia* meaning revelatory manifestation of the divine. That is, those of us who follow Christ – and others who share a belief in the Spirit of God abiding in human flesh, in the Spirit-infused material nature of creation – believe that there are times when we experience a sudden – even explosive – recognition of the divine essence in our lives as human beings. Such events are not locked in the past, as in the story of the magi in the Bible. Rather, the story of the magi in the Bible invites us to be on the lookout for our own stars to follow and for manger-like places that hold the birth of God’s love and care for us.

Epiphany embodies that spirit of longing within each of us for the presence of God that illuminates what might otherwise be merely a day-to-day grayness of life without the presence of such guiding stars as those the wise ones follow. It is Matthew who often likened discipleship to a kind of shining which recalls the star that shone on the Christ child so very long ago. A grown-up Jesus would tell us all this very important truth: *You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

It is so very important for us to remember, isn’t it – especially in this season of Epiphany – that now that the story of Christmas has ended and, in fact, that the resurrected Christ has ascended and the Spirit has been given us, that we are the ones through whom the light must shine forth? At least those wise ones with ears to hear will respond and begin to follow the star that leads us on. Amen.