

“Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Key verse: Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Matthew 2:1-2a

One of the highlights of the holidays for me was the rousing rendition of *The Twelve Days of Christmas* offered up by the attendees at Morningside’s Carol Sing the week before Christmas. Much to everyone’s relief, Walter Huff chose Sheryl and David Wingert to sing “...Five golden rings...” rather than any of the rest of us. There is that moment when you wonder: Will this be the year I have to sing it?

We all enjoyed singing our way through the rest of *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, racing to keep up with the accelerating tempo – “...Ten swans a-swimming, eleven Lords a-leaping, twelve drummers drumming...”

Yesterday actually was the twelfth day of Christmas. I wonder if twelve drummers drumming showed up at anybody’s front door? Another name for the twelfth day of Christmas is Epiphany. Unlike Christmas, which has been so thoroughly commercialized and commandeered by the culture, Epiphany still belongs, body and soul, to the church. Its proper liturgical name is “The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”. The Magi were Gentiles, which means, literally, anyone who is not of the Jewish faith or from a Jewish nation. Remember, Jesus himself was not a Gentile. Jesus was a Jew. He was of the house and lineage of David. Everyone in the Christmas story was Jewish, even Herod, interestingly enough. His family had converted to Judaism a half century before the birth of Christ.

Epiphany is a grand celebration. It celebrates the first great breakthrough of the Christian faith, as the glory of Christ and the true nature of his identity are revealed to the world, as represented by the Gentiles, who came to Jerusalem in search of the Messiah. As Peter Gomes of Harvard’s Memorial Church puts it: “What began as a very private annunciation first to Mary, then to Joseph, what was shown to the

shepherds and then to the animals in the manger is now made clear to an ever-expanding host of witnesses.” Epiphany is not only one day on the church calendar; it begins an entire season of manifestation and revelation, culminating on Transfiguration Sunday six weeks from now, as the somber journey from Lent to Easter begins.

Today’s journey is the journey of the wise men. They are present in just about every manger scene I have ever seen, but the likelihood is that they did not arrive in Jerusalem until weeks, perhaps months, after the birth of Jesus. Matthew tells us that they entered a house in Bethlehem, not a stable. I’m not a purist about when the Magi arrived. The kings in our crèche scene were always sitting right there with Mary and Joseph and the baby, although this year, I had a problem. Joseph had gone missing, disappearing into a cloud of tissue paper. I fear he may never be seen again. He was gone last year, and I’d forgotten. This year, I substituted one of the Magi for Joseph. He looked a little funny with that turban on his head. That left two wise men, which presented problems of their own.

Then, there is the question of what would have happened if three wise **women** had followed the star. Rumor has it that they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, brought a casserole and much more practical gifts than gold, frankincense and myrrh. (1) What’s a baby going to do with those kinds of gifts?

Over the years, the Magi have been given names: Melchior, Gasper, and Balthazar, but nowhere in scripture or in the history books are their names ever mentioned. We know that they were from the East, perhaps a region called Parthia, which corresponds roughly to a province in what is now modern Iran. Tradition calls the Magi kings, but they were actually priests – priests at court, ready to advise rulers and princes as to what the message of the stars might be. They were experts, in other words, in astrology. They believed, as did most people of their time and place in history, that stars influenced human events. They were revered for their prescience and feared because of it as well.

In our mind’s eye, we see them traveling across the desert night on their camels, a steady light from heaven shining down upon them. To the Magi, the brightness was a sign of divine promise, though it could have been a convergence of Jupiter and Saturn. Indeed the Magi saw in the

star such an unprecedented promise that they were willing to follow it wherever it led them, which leads us to the most interesting question: Was the star wrong? The reason I ask is that the wise men followed the star to Jerusalem, and Jesus was not born in Jerusalem. He was born in Bethlehem. The celestial map quest the wise men used had never been wrong before, and yet they could not find the one for whom they were searching in the big city, in the metropolis that was the center of government and commerce and power. That is where they expected the Messiah to be born, as did everyone else, including the prophet Isaiah. When they got to Jerusalem, they asked people, “Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?”

Now when Herod, who was Rome’s vassal ruler over Judea, heard the question these foreigners were asking, he trembled in his palace. *How can they be looking for a new king? I’m the ruler around here.* And when Herod got upset, all of Jerusalem got upset with him. The city was nervous. Herod called the wise men of Jerusalem together and asked them what could possibly have happened. “Where is the Messiah that the Jews are waiting for? Where was the Messiah supposed to be born?”

They said, “Look to the little minor prophet, Micah, who wrote, “. . . ‘and you, oh Bethlehem, from you shall come the ruler who is to shepherd my people.’” And so it was to be that Bethlehem became the place where God’s light burst forth into the world.

As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “Both Isaiah and the Magi were off by nine miles”, which is the distance between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. (2) The birth of the Savior took place, not in a location of influence and affluence, but among the small, the vulnerable and the decidedly non-influential. Did the star have it wrong? You decide. Starlight is starlight. Starlight shines across wide swaths of sky. Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem that it would have been easy to think that the star was stopping over the capital city, when actually Bethlehem was its destination.

The star was not wrong; it was the perception of the Magi that was off by nine miles. When Herod heard the prophecy of Micah, he sent the Magi to little Bethlehem to search for the child. They went, keeping their eyes on the star that had brought them close and now was going to lead them directly to the treasure. It stopped directly over the place where the child

was. When they saw that the star had stopped, “they were overwhelmed with joy and knelt down and paid the child homage,” offering him the gifts they had brought, gifts fit for a king.

And oh, the gift **they** received: the revelation of the presence of God in the person of the baby born to Mary. What an awesome thing it must have been to look into the face of the child and to see the face of the living God. Oh, those lucky wise men!

I love it that when they realized that they had landed in the wrong place, they did not defend their original assumptions; they quickly corrected their course and went to where they were supposed to go. Because they were flexible, they did not miss the greatest thing that ever happened in their lives and in the life of the world. They weren't off by much, but nine miles were the difference between the “same old, same old” for them and the possibility of genuine transformation. If they had been too stubborn to make an adjustment, imagine what might have happened. The circles of divine love that emanated from the incarnation of Jesus Christ might have been confined to one small place and one community of people. But as it happened, the Magi came, and they saw, and now **we** see that the good news of God in Jesus Christ is good news for all people. Thanks be to God that the outsiders persevered in finding their way and were welcomed in the house where Jesus was.

If you want to find yourself in the Christmas story, look to the Magi, for we are Gentiles too. Though the church has wrestled across the centuries with the question of “who is in, and who is out,” the clear message of the Magi's journey is that the gift of the Messiah is as much for those on the outside as it is for those who can trace their lineage back to Abraham and Sarah, or John Calvin, or Martin Luther, or St. Augustine. In every age, the church is tempted to narrow its assumptions about the breadth of God's love - to say this is good news for you, but not good news for **you**. In every age, the spirit of God corrects the church, reforms the church, and reminds the church that to be faithful to Christ, to pay homage to him, is to tear down dividing walls, is to bear witness to the breadth and expanse of God's saving love.

Our union with Christ leads us inevitably into union with other people. This union is made visible so clearly and profoundly at the Lord's Table. Wherever we come from, whatever our background, whatever our

theology, whatever our sexuality, whatever...we have come together because we are a part of the one body of Christ to partake of the bread that is our Savior. (3) We come not because we are so good and worthy, we come for the simple reason that we are chosen. Remember Jesus' words, "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

A few of us are chosen in dramatic, wondrous ways, as the wise men were. Most of us, though, are guided by more subtle heavenly light. A friend says, "Why not come to church with me this Sunday?" A need shows up in your heart to serve your neighbor. You find yourself coming to church on Sunday and sitting still and remembering that God, not you, makes the world go around. The star shines all the time. It shone for the wise men, and it shines for you, sometimes brightly, sometimes subtly, but it is always shining. Our job is not to be merely star-gazers, but star-chasers. (4)

The wise men offered their gifts to the baby, and then, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, who had evil plans in mind, left for their own country by another road. Remember, this revelation of glory takes place in the REAL world. The world is still the same, laced with violence and envy. The massacre by Herod's people of all the infant boys in Bethlehem was about to unfold, and Joseph would have to spirit the child and his mother away to Egypt, in order to save his life and secure the future.

The world is still a troubled place, but the wise men returned as people who had been transformed. They went home a different way. Change is what happens to people when they truly encounter Christ, and when people change, the world begins to change. Christ's presence has hallowed all of human life. Every place that we go, all people that we meet in our daily lives are alive with the love and presence and light of God. (5)

W.H. Auden wrote in his "Christmas Oratorio, For the Time Being" – *There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair, irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem from insignificance. . . remembering the stable where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It.*

I can think of no greater miracle than the miracle of Epiphany and the glad realization of our own inclusion in the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.

- (1) As told by John M. Buchanan in “Beyond Bethlehem,” 1/6/02.
- (2) Walter Brueggemann, *Living By the Word*, Chalice Press, 2005, p. 16-18.
- (3) Hans Kung, *The Church*.
- (4) Eugene C. Bay, “Epiphany’s Centerpiece,” 1/7/01.
- (5) Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, William Morrow and Company, 1998, p. 29.