

Oh, There They Are

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A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 2:1-12

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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Every year since 1986, Professor William Studwell of Northern Illinois University, an expert on Christmas Carols, has chosen a “Carol of the Year.” In that first year it was “Carol of the Bells” and the day before he died in August 2010 he told his daughter that his final selection would be *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*. In 2007, Studwell picked *We Three Kings of Orient Are* on its 150th

anniversary announcing "It's one of the only things I remember about third grade ... being one of the kings."

One of the kings. I remember clearly the anticipation of being old enough to take on one of these prime roles in our Sunday School pageant. In my church it was often three of the teens – taller than the rest of us, regal enough to wear the robes left over from the Odd Fellows Lodge that once met in our building, able to balance the precious crowns on their heads, having the patience to walk slowly down the center aisle of the darkened sanctuary. “O-Oh ... star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright.”

Who could come up with the best treasure container? – mom’s ceramic vase with jewels dangling over the lip, dad’s cigar box gilded in foil, a casserole bowl from the church kitchen that may very well have been 1,970 years old. Sometimes you got to wear a beard. And occasionally one of the three would be a girl – it was the radical 70s, you know?

Most of us know the scene. Christmas cards and bulletin covers and pieces of art. A stately procession of three kings in turbans and crowns, elaborate capes and robes, fancy slippers and treasure boxes, an entourage of servants and camels trailing behind, maybe a banner or two waving above, wandering across the desert backlit by the bright star leading them to their destination. Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar – one Celtic-looking from Europe, one African-looking, one Asian-looking. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They stand and kneel before the hay-filled manger which cradles the baby while oxen and donkey poke their heads into the picture. Mary and Joseph look adoringly prayerful at their newborn.

It’s a great story, right? A wonderfully majestic piece of our biblical Christmas story. It’s worth hearing it from scripture again:

- *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi ... – Magi? I thought they were “kings”*
- *... 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.”*
... – From the East? Europe is to the northwest of Jerusalem; Africa is to the southwest; at least most of Asia is to the east – so much for the diversity of the group.
- *... 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.”*— Twelve days after Christmas Day, right? That’s when we celebrate the Epiphany, the Feast of the Three Kings – January 6 – “On the 12th day of Christmas ...” It doesn’t say that here.
- *... 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. – a moving star? I thought it was one of those with the long tail that was always over the stable?*

- *... On entering the house,... – A house? Huh? “Whatchu talkin’ ‘bout Willis?”* What happened to the stable and the animals and the hay bale?
- *... they saw the child with Mary his mother... – The child with his mother Mary? Where’s Joseph? He’s supposed to be there isn’t he?*
- *... and they knelt down and paid him homage. – Okay, kneeling, that fits.*
- *... Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. – Cool. Three gifts. Now we’ll get their names.*
- *... And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Wait. No names? It doesn’t even say there are three?*

Here we are on the 8th day of Christmas and we haven’t even gotten to this part of the story. The magi – the wise ones – the three kings – have not been a part of our crèche until just this morning when we had the children add them, 4 days early even. Where have they been?

The great traditions that have arisen around this piece of the story have gotten merged into one for most of us in the Christian west. But most of it is not from the Bible. The two very brief tellings of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke really tell us very little. And the appearance of these world travelers in Matthew’s Gospel is just a few verses – no details, really – but as is the case with any event in history, human nature makes us fill in the blanks because we hate a sketchy history.

I read a new book yesterday – *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise men’s Journey to Bethlehem*. It’s the first English translation of an ancient manuscript originally written in Syriac, translated and published by Brent Landau. Perhaps from as early as the Second Century, this retelling of the story has probably picked up pieces from Matthew’s Gospel but also from other written and oral tales surrounding these mysterious foreign visitors. This manuscript is written mostly in the first person voice of the magi themselves. There are 12 magi here – each one having a particular name – and they come from a mystical mythical land known as Shir on the coast of the farthest eastern edge of the world – where presumably one would fall off if you went any farther. These are descendents of Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve, and they have been waiting for generations – kingly fathers handing down the role to their sons – waiting for the fulfillment of a prophesy known from the very beginning of humanity itself – *a star of indescribable brightness will someday appear; heralding the birth of God in human form*. The star that appears to them and leads them is not simply a bright light in the sky – but it is a human-form Christ appearing within the star – the same star that once stood over the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. This star carries the 12 magi to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem in the blink of an eye – not 12 days or 2 years. They take with them treasures and riches saved up through the generations and kept in the Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries in the Mountain of Victories – not just three small boxes of gold and spices. They have met each month at this sacred place to worship in silence – what the word “magi” means in their original language, “praying in silence” – waiting for the star-Light to appear.

What a wonderful story created from our sketchy biblical details – the earliest Christian art even reflects this telling of the story – from the walls of the catacombs into the 5th and 6th Centuries, even as late as the 16th Century – artwork shows this large number of magi, the floating star-child, the abundance of gifts. This text is so intriguing that perhaps someday it will be the next *DaVinci Code*

prequel. And after reading this I have no doubt what a fun Christmas pageant this would make.

Who would play the infant Jesus suspended from the ceiling in a floating star built by our church sexton? How would we cast the 12 magi chosen from among our own children? The piles of gifts they would bring. Creating costumes that reflect what we think would come from literally the end of the world! The baby Jesus even lectures Mary who has accused the Magi of trying to steal the newborn – he calms her by reminding her that he is the savior of the whole world not just her baby – what fun it would be to direct that scene. (Perhaps Viviana, our newest infant baptized today, could play Jesus?!?!)

The possibilities for filling in the details of the story of the magi are endless. They’re not there during our Advent season as we await the coming of God-with-us. They’re not there on Christmas Eve when we light candles and are surrounded by reminders of the Light in our lives. They’re not there on Christmas Day when we place the baby in the manger and remind ourselves again how precious is life and God’s love for us. But then, finally, there they are popping into our story these twelve days after Christmas.

Yet the real question remains, what do we do with the story today? Not so much what are the details but where does this magical story take us – today and tomorrow? What gifts do we bring? On what journey do we find ourselves? To where does God call us?

Herod’s claim to power is based on an understanding that true power lies in Jerusalem – he relies on Isaiah’s prophetic words to bolster his power. But here his advisors and these strangers tell him that Micah says power is coming into the world in the tiny little town of Bethlehem. So Herod is threatened – the power of the world is threatened – the supposed status quo is threatened by this new word.

This story is here to remind us that God-with-us is “born in a rural place, dusty, unnoticed and unpretentious. It is the proper place for the birth of the One who will offer an alternative to the arrogant learning of intellectuals and the arrogant power of political rulers.” This is the reversal of current conditions that happens with this story. Theologian Walter Brueggemann tells us the magi missed their mark by 9 miles. If they thought power would be found in “Jerusalem, with its great pretensions,” they discovered that truth arrived in “Bethlehem, with its modest promises.” This is a step away from the normal so the magi have a decision to make and so also do we.

“We can choose a ‘return to normalcy’,” writes Dr. Brueggemann, “in a triumphalist mode, a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability. It is amazing – the true accent of epiphany – that the wise men do not resist this alternative but go on to the village. Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganize their wealth and learning, and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.”

Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem. They missed their supposed goal by nine miles. And it was a wonderful occurrence which led them and us to a world-changing moment.

Our task today is to let God set us off our mark as well. Most of us are looking in the wrong place – we’re looking for 3 kings and 3 gifts – we’re looking for more money and greater fame and bigger toys and the upper hand in all we do. Brueggemann: “We are off by at least nine miles. We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency. Epiphany is a good time to take the journey ...,” a journey away from our excessive pretensions. “The way beyond is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.”

Here then is God’s call to us. Let this magical story take on new meaning – power wrapped in a mystical revelation from God by a newly imagined magi story – and like the magi let us head home a new way. Let it lead us to a new and radical understanding of God’s presence with us.

Oh, there they are. We found the magi. Now what they look like and where we go with them is entirely up to us. We can go where God leads, away from the powers that surround us to find a newly opened vision of how to serve God among those whom the world rejects, to be one of those whom the world rejects, to serve God in all that we do. This story requires no less of us; our baptism requires no less of us; our place at this table this morning requires no less of us; our claim to be followers of Jesus requires no less of us.

Let us then go where God leads.

Amen.