

## We Have Seen the Magi, and They Are Us

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Matthew 2:1-12

*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.*

In first century, Christians used to eat children. Really. We have source material from the period that details it. They way it was back then, eating a baby was one's initiation into the Christian church. The child was baked into a loaf of bread, and if you were joining the church, you took the first bite, and then everyone else helped you eat it. I'm not sure why this tradition did not last, the cannibalism and the infanticide. Now we just ask you to complete a time and talent survey and consider tithing.

Of course, this is not true, well, except for the time and talent surveys and trying to tithe part. That is true, but Christians never utilized, authorized, or endorsed cannibalism. However, that did not stop detractors of the early church from writing and many people from such nonsense. There is other nonsense that was believed about the

early Christians that I cannot describe here (if you can imagine), but suffice it to say, many early outsiders to the church found it much easier to believe what someone else said about Christ and his church than to see for themselves. It is for this reason that the Epiphany of the Lord is such an important day in the life of Christian believers.

The Epiphany (which means manifestation) of our Lord is one of the great, although rather overlooked holy days of the Christian year. It understandably gets kind of lost in the shadow of Christmas, although it is an older festival than Christmas. However, this special day, celebrated on the twelfth day after Christmas is so rich in history in history and tradition. Furthermore, it is full of meaning and foreshadowing as it points us towards some of the most important aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Instead of focusing, as we normally do, on the gifts brought by these Magi and what those gifts can teach us about Jesus and all that he would eventually become, today, I think we should focus upon the journey they had to make in order to deliver those gifts.

The Magi's journey to Bethlehem was a journey of great distance. They most likely were citizens of Persia (modern day Iran), and their journey would likely have taken them through parts of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel. They would have been men who were unfamiliar with the stories and scriptures of Israel, men who were outsiders, heretics from a foreign land with a foreign faith, men not looking for a messiah; just men who had seen signs in the heavens, and who were willing to cross borders, political, religious, and cultural, in order to see and attempt to understand this new thing that God had done.

There is something uniquely human about wandering and about crossing borders, whatever they may be, and facing whatever we find. Many animals are content to stay at

home for all their lives. Migratory animals swim or fly for thousands of miles, drawn by some powerful, natural force that they simply obey until they reach their final destinations. Yet we humans are different, perhaps somewhere in between. More and more, we find ourselves having traveled great distances from the place of our birth in order to live where we are now, others of us find ourselves still living in the places of our birth. So we too can migrate great distances or we can stay in the same place, but unlike the animals, we have to make a choice, which anyone who has ever been faced with it knows is both a blessing and a curse.

Even a casual study of scripture reveals why journeying is such a powerful metaphor for the spiritual life. It begins with Adam and Eve's journey out of Eden, and includes the wandering of Abraham and Sarah, the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, which takes place on a journey. Moses and Aaron journey to Egypt to stand up to Pharaoh, and then the people of Israel journey in the wilderness for forty years prior to inheriting the Promised Land. Jonah journeys in the opposite direction to which God sends him, only to eventually change course and head in the right direction. On Christmas, the Messiah is born only after a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and then immediately after his birth, the holy family flee as refugees to Egypt before returning to Nazareth.

The Messiah would tell a story of a young son who would journey far from home and waste his inheritance and then after he "came unto himself," making the long journey back home to repent to his father. The Messiah would tell another story of a man who was robbed and beaten and left for dead, only to be ignored by two men on a journey, but taken in and cared for by a Samaritan who stopped his journey in order to care for him,

something that in this case represents not only a journey but the crossing of some very old and very difficult cultural borders.

Yet it is through these courageous journeys, through these times of seeking, searching, wandering, and crossing borders that God changes us. Perhaps the greatest gift the Magi gave to the holy family was not the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Perhaps it was their willingness to go out of their way for Jesus; to ignore Herod's orders to report to him the whereabouts of Jesus and take the long way on their return home. Perhaps it was their decision to not take the old, familiar pathways and to strike out in a newer, albeit harder direction. Perhaps this is what this text asks of us today.

Perhaps this is why God calls us to the manger: so that we may see the Lord for ourselves, and in having seen him, in having been in his presence, we can know why the old pathways do not serve us anymore, and to be bold in our faith, and to learn to begin a journey in 2010 in a new direction.

Jesus, who seemed to always be travelling from one place to another, said of himself "foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." I think that, among other things, this means that God has a heart for those who wander, for those who search for the life God wants them to live, even if, or perhaps *especially* if that journey requires one to leave family behind, to cross borders, political or cultural. In our reading this morning from Leviticus, God commands "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." It is a commandment repeated elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. God commands God's people to be kind and generous to

those who are crossing borders, because you have pulled up your roots and crossed borders, too.

The people who became Christians in the earliest days of the church were people who actually spent time with people who already were Christians. They worshipped in each other's houses; there wasn't a church with an illuminated sign on every corner, no "church section" in the phone book, no Googling the names of the churches in a particular postal code. These were people who saw past the baseless stereotyping of Christians that was in vogue at the time; people who investigated the rumors for themselves.

I have believed for some time that the Christian faith is like stained glass. From the outside, it may seem dull and confusing, even ugly. To make sense out of it, one must make the journey to see it from the inside. Likewise, our God is one who not only calls us to leave things, places, ideologies behind, but our God commands us to show the same grace and hospitality that we desire for ourselves to others making the journey as well, so that we may learn to see our fellow sojourners as God's children, made in God's image, from the inside as well.

On what journey is God calling you so that you may more deeply encounter the living Christ? As we embark upon a new year together, what is God calling you to risk or to leave behind in order to seek and search to know Christ and his church for yourself?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.