

St. Mark's Episcopal Church  
Sunday January 5, 2025  
Text: Matthew 2:1-12  
Theme: Home by Another Way  
Preacher: Christopher McLaren

The story of the Three Magi from the East is one that captivates our imaginations with ease. We love the image of distinguished noble philosophers and scientists of old in search of the meaning of life, following a star or a comet or an astrological sign that drew them out of their ordinary lives and far from home to the one hidden among the stars.

For some reason I often remember the James Taylor song Home by another way.

Those Magic men the Magi, some people call them wise  
Or oriental even kings, well anyways those guys  
They visited with Jesus and they sure enjoyed their stay  
Then warned in a dream of Herod's scheme  
They went home by another way.

Poets and song writers have wrapped their arts around it and one poet Longfellow even dared to give the three sages names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. There have been countless paintings of the scene at the stable with the bejeweled and bedazzled Magi kneeling in homage to the infant Christ squirming in the feeding trough with the host of heaven, the beasts of the fields and the wonderstruck shepherds along with the pious Mary and Joseph looking on. But if you actually read

Matthew it's not really clear who these wise ones from the east were and how many of them there actually were or where exactly they came from. The gospel of Matthew it seems is a little vague on the facts but that has not stopped people from finding a great deal to love and reflect upon in this story.

As one preacher noted, it is not that the facts don't matter. It's just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and the stories can be true whether they happened or not." What is important about stories is not just the facts but what the story itself does to those who embrace it and really listen to what it is saying. Some people want to cut the world up into neat little compartments of what actually literally happened and what did not happen but there of course is another way home. This is the way people of faith throughout the centuries have practiced, that of listening to the story itself, taking it to your loving heart and discovering within yourself the truth of the story. Stories that are deeply true have a way of moving us, we sense that they are true in a way that doesn't need scientific proof or an argument, we know they are true because they make us laugh and cry at the same time. The truth of a story can be felt. And one of the most important tests of a truthful story is whether the story when heard and embraced over time makes one more human. Does the story open people up to the world around them? Does it expand their heart or generosity toward others? Does it make them people with more capacity for love and joy? These are the tests of a story that is true in the most important of ways.

The story of the Magi is an origin story for Jesus, it tells us something much deeper than just of his birth. The events surrounding the birth of Jesus are intended to tell us something about his future destiny. For the ancients when this kind of thing happened it was a sign that God was at work in the birth, the one who holds the present and the future together was weaving a story in the birth of this child. This is of course what happens in the Epiphany Story: the future rejection and acceptance of Jesus is foreshadowed in powerful ways at his birth. King Herod, the stinky rascal prepares his thugs to eliminate any competition for the throne of power and the Magi bow in humble worship around the infant king.

The story pulls heaven and earth together as well. In the ancient cosmology God resided in the heavens but desired that his kingdom would extend to the affairs of his creation. So, when heaven and earth come together, it is a sign that God's will is active. That is also what happens in this story: heaven in the form of a star and earth in the form of a child align with one another. Therefore, God who rules over time and space, is known when time becomes unified and space becomes connected. Hidden within this story are all kind of cryptic theological messages for those who eyes to see them and ears to hear them. The imaginative theology of the Magi's visit to the Christ Child is charged with theological import and leaves no doubt that God is the ultimate author of the life of Jesus, squirming in his mother's arms.

Of course, part of the story that disturbs us so much is the bit about the Magi's Visit to the Palace of Herod.

As James Taylor reminds us:

Stay clear of royal welcomes

Avoid a big to-do

A king who would slaughter the innocents

Will not cut deal for you.

The story of the Magi gives us a view into the sheer evil of power seeking to maintain power. The rejection of the child Jesus is unrelenting evil. When the Magi tell king Herod, the current king of the Jews, of the heavenly indications of a newborn king of the Jews, the immediate reaction is fear. The Advent of the long a-awaited Messiah does not lead to celebrations to parties in the streets to poetry being written. It leads to suspicion and a thirst for the violence of self-preservation. Herod and the religious authorities know that a new king, even a child-king will eventually become a threat to their power, their status quo, their position. So, the birth of a new king is met with rejection and violence.

Back to the Magi for a moment, we love these sagacious ones whomever they were. What do they symbolize for us? I think one possibility is that they symbolize the spiritual journey, the quest to know life at a depth, to discover the deeper meaning of relationship with the maker of heaven and earth. The discovery, their finding of the Christ Child with the Mary and Joseph is of course the high point of their journey, but their journey has been worth all of the trouble. They have learned so much more than if they had stayed home. They had seen the reality of evil in Herod's beady eyes. They felt the longing of

their hearts go out to a lovely peasant family and found themselves giving away the most precious of gifts.

I think the Magi were joyful because they were on a journey, a search. They were joyful because, looking at the baby Jesus, the magi knew that they were at their long-awaited destination. Presumably, most of their fellow magi stayed home, took no journeys toward the east, refused to go off on some wild camel ride to see a baby on the basis of nothing more than a star. These magi — we don't know whether there were three or 13 of them, Matthew only says they offered the baby Jesus three kinds of gifts. These Magi were the sort of people who were looking for something, willing to risk a journey, brave enough to hit the road in search. And when they arrived at this tender scene of mother and child, they somehow knew that this was what they had been looking for all along- and it overwhelmed them with joy just like it does us when we find something we've been longing and looking for ourselves. They had found the one whom they had sought, the fulfillment of human longing. Where Herod will reject and try to murder, the Magi accept and worship.

Every trip is a risk.

But if trips are a risk, then babies are an even bigger risk. The risky birth of Jesus sets off a whole train of difficult and at times bloody events in motion. The baby that the magi discovered was not the end of the journey, but the beginning, as Christ always tends to be for those who

follow him. Note I said, “for those who follow him.” We don’t just “believe” that Jesus is the Messiah we actually trust that following in his steps is a way that leads to life. Following Christ is a risky business because it inevitably takes us places that we would not have gone without his leading. Like the magi beckoned by his star’s rising in the east, who followed it – up for the adventure. We too like them are stargazers and travelers. We are followers of the light that shone in Bethlehem long ago, that shined out of a manger giving new light to the world. We too are seekers after the light, after the truth, after a life-changing relationship with God. We have seen his star shining through the gospels and have hit the road look for adventure with the divine.

The story has quite a lot of tension in it, the magi finding and worshiping the infant Christ in their joy and Herod and all of Jerusalem filled with fear. I wonder where do you find yourself in this story? As you stand before this new infant king, are you like fearful Herod and the people of Jerusalem today? Or are you the joyful magi? I know that sounds like an easy choice? But as is often the case, I imagine that it is not just one or the other. We feel kinship with both. The story places us in front of a new life with the Advent of a king, a king who wants to rule our hearts and will lead in a very different and demanding ways than we might expect and this can make us fearful. This little child invites us on an unexpected journey and in every journey, there is both fear and joy.

The truth is that we live in a powerful nation so we can identify with King Herod. Herod had the Roman army behind him, the most powerful military in the world, and he was still afraid - afraid of a baby - afraid of

his power and influence slipping away. And we too are powerful, with the largest and most advanced military every assembled and we are still a people filled with fear. Just like “Jerusalem” we are fearful even in our great strength. There are things in this world that make us anxious just like the possibility of an infant king born in Bethlehem made Herod mad with fright. You know the names of these fears, so I don’t have to rehearse them for you. Fear leads us to do some terribly violent and awful things just as it did Herod and it’s important that we admit to this, we are not all sweetness and light.

In a strange way, little baby Jesus becomes a source of judgment for us and for the world. What is our response to this child, joy, kneeling down to worship the source of life and love, or fear of a kingdom that will bring change and challenge the human status quo? When we are fearful, we are not at our best. The story tells us that Herod’s fear led to death and violence. It gives us pause to reflect on where our fear leads us?

However, Mary and her child brought out the best in the Magi. We are also like the magi in their joy. Just witnessing the magi finding the child, and kneeling down in homage and giving their gifts to the baby Jesus is a reminder of what we too are about. What else are we doing here in church this morning if not giving ourselves to and worshipping the gift of Jesus? It is interesting to think of the magi as the very first church, the very first to bend the knee and worship Jesus and to offer their gifts. For them, the magi, this baby and the journey that he calls them to undertake, is a source of great joy. My mentoring priest was fond of saying, “Christopher, have enough Christianity to make you joyful not

just enough to make you miserable.” The magi are described as joyful in the presence of Christ and I hope that is how people who encounter our community would describe the people of St. Mark’s.

After they had experienced Christ, the magi “departed by another road for their own country.” Are we willing to go on that journey with joy, to give up our sense of comfort and control and go to where the star, and its Lord can lead us? Can we, as the people of St. Mark’s, rise with this shining new star and rise to a new sense of adventure, forsake our cozy boundaries, and go forth following him? This story asks us if we can stretch and grow, strike out for a foreign land and unknown adventure. It also asks us to take a new road when we know the old one leads back through the hatred and anger of Herod. Can we eschew the road of violence and revenge? Can we literally turn and go another way – away from fear and hatred? Can we go home by another way?

James Taylor again inspires:

Then warned in a dream of King Herod’s scheme  
They went home by another way.  
Yes, they went home by another way  
Home by another way  
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too  
And go home by another way.

Perhaps that’s a chief requirement for being a Christian — a willingness to go on a journey, to go by another way – another road. We know how easy it is to get comfortable. It is far too easy for us to gather here in

order to settle in, settle down, as if church were the end of the journey with God, rather than it's beginning. Yet that is not what this beautiful story of the magi is about. It is about seeking out the Lord of life in far-flung and unlikely places. For God comes to us in surprising ways and beckons us to follow. For we follow a living God, a demanding savior who leads us forward, encouraging us to change and grow and in whose service a life of adventure is found. So, this day let us like the magi from the east commit ourselves to follow the star of Christ, wherever it may lead. And let us delight in going home by another way!