

On the Road with the Wise Men

Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2022

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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. - Matthew 2:1-12

In every Christmas pageant I've ever seen, the most extravagant costumes are always worn by the wise men. We expect that they will be wildly attired; the more outlandish the better! And they were *magi* – from which we get the English word magic – astrologers, apparently. Their ways of wisdom would have been utterly foreign to the ways of God as taught and practiced by the people of Israel. For the most part, all these centuries later, the magi continue to be foreigners. We dress them up for an exotic peek, and then we safely return their lively pageant attire to deep storage for another year.

But join me at ground level with these magi for a bit. We may notice ways that their journey and their faith and their choices may be surprisingly like our own. Notice, for starters, that the wise men traveled together. The whole story is strewn with 'they' and 'we.'

- "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and [we] have come to pay him homage."
- "... ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising ..."
- "... they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And ... they left for their own country by another road."

The implicit lesson-by-example here, reinforced throughout the Scriptures, may be that the meaningful spiritual journey is not to be undertaken alone. We do have our solitary moments. We must take final responsibility for our individual lives. But we are called by the Holy One to travel the life of faith in the company of others. So it is that this coming Sunday we will recite the Baptismal Covenant and hear the question, "Will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship." Will you continue ... *in fellowship*? "I will, with God's help."

Continued ...

But:

- Who are our own traveling companions, the wise ones with whom we share the journey of faith?
- How do we turn to them, or they to us, at important crossroads?
- Can we trust them with our most sacred and vulnerable questions?
- What conformities are expected, and what freedoms are allowed, along the way that we seek and walk and serve together?

A second quality that sets the wise men apart is gender-specific – they stopped to ask for directions. It's a miracle! “... *wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child ...?"* It's a simple point, but it may lead us to wonder:

- How many of us even know where we are headed or what or whom we are looking for?
- What questions should we now be stopping to ask?
- Are we able to name it and ask for help when we've lost our way or arrived at a mistaken destination?

A wise man in one of Paulo Coelho's novels counsels a young seeker, saying, “*When you find your path, you must not be afraid. You need to have sufficient courage to make mistakes. Disappointment, defeat, and despair are the tools God uses to show us the way.*” (From the novel *Brida*.)

Though they have questions, the wise ones in our Epiphany story are also single-minded. By way of detours and questions and a guiding star and perseverance, they make their way to Christ, salvation, the one who will become known – who is already being made known through them – as the Messiah and the Light of the World. They give extravagantly of their own earthly treasure, knowing it is only a dim representation of the heavenly and eternal treasure they have sought and found. The example of these foreigners, these magi, makes me wonder:

- Am I as single-minded?
- What stars catch my attention? Which do I follow, or not, and why?
- What is the treasure that endures?

Finally, let's briefly wonder about the end of the story: “... *having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*” Their intentional change of course may lead us to ask:

- Is the road we came by, or the road we've been on, the right road to get us safely home?
- What about the peril or tedium or expectations along our road? Stretches of the right way may be perilous or slow or narrow or uninteresting. But then again, too much for too long should get our attention and may lead us to wonder about another road.
- Has some dream or other sign or revelation or wise soul come along to suggest we take another look at the map and, like the magi, find another way?

We often see the wise men as exotic and foreign. But traveling alongside them for a bit, we may recognize motives and stopping points and questions and decisions not unlike those in our own most important journeys. May we, like them, find our way, on the right road, and be blessed along the way to seek and find the treasured One before whom we also will kneel and pay homage. Amen.