

The adoration of the magi

Epiphany 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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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

Perhaps you have already taken a look at 'The adoration of the magi,' as imagined and rendered by Hieronymus Bosch at the end of the 15th or early 16th century, and as found on this morning's bulletin covers. Only the central panel of this famous triptych is shown here. Our best view of the whole work would be at the Museo Nacional del Prado, in Madrid. Too bad we're not there ...

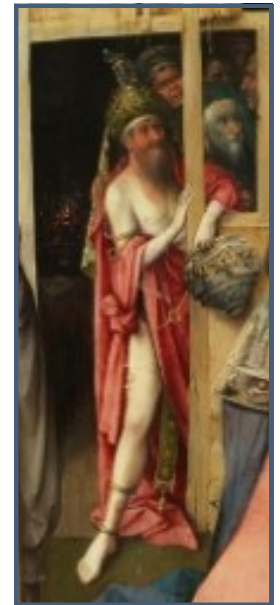
Standing in front of the original painting, we could better appreciate the stunning colors and composition. A docent might point out how the images of the Virgin and Christ child are consistent with other Dutch paintings of the time. We might agree that the reverent postures of the wise men evoke a tone familiar in Christmas-themed art from many cultures and eras.

Unfortunately, the reproduction on our bulletin covers cannot capture all of Bosch's spectacularly fine and highly symbolic detail. We are unable to see that the gift of the foremost magi is decorated with an image of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19), foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The finery of another of the 'kings' depicts the visit to King Solomon by the Queen of Sheba, a story told in the 1st Book of Kings (10:1-13) and thought to prefigure the wise men's own visit to the Christ child.

Closer examination also reveals features of this painting that deviate from traditional and comforting themes. The more one sees, the more perplexed and troubled one may become. The scene, for instance, includes a fourth king, standing in the relative background, the only king who has not removed his crown. He has no intention of subordinating his power. Lurking behind him in the darkness are some who could be seen as the fourth king's malevolent minions.



The torso and legs of this fourth king are largely exposed. He is only scantily covered with an elegant but disheveled cloth. Dangling between his legs is a gold sash embroidered with demons. Bosh may have intended a comparison by a particular juxtaposition. On the right side: the innocent, complete nakedness of the Christ child, perhaps symbolic of the original body-naiveté of Adam and Eve. On the left side: the carnal indulgence of the fourth king, an icon of all of our misguided and perverted human appetites since humanity's Fall. In circles of art interpreters, this fourth king is widely called the Antichrist.



Two armies are advancing into view, one from each side of the painting, near the roof peak of the dilapidated barn. Their trajectories suggest that they will clash near the center of the painting. The warring armies may represent our human lust for power and the confidence that we habitually place in violence, necessitating the birth of the Savior. Or the armies may be Bosh's ironic comment on the ongoing warring of his own time, and our own, and to the end of the ages. Other features of our sorrowful human condition and even the sins of the Church are routinely imagined elsewhere here.

We actually have no record of what Hieronymus Bosch meant to convey in the fantastical details of this or his other known paintings. Scholars continue to generate and debate new theories. But apart from theories or our own art literacy or illiteracy, I wonder if some of us may be able to see in this painting what one essayist describes as Bosch's "*deep insight into humanity's desires and deepest fears.*"¹ Some of us may even see here the terrain of our own hearts.

This is not a Hallmark story. The magi traveled and sought in the context of cynicism, mistrust and unforgiving thirst for power: "*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.*" How many of us know the part of ourselves that is weirdly in sync with the point of view of Herod, or that fourth king in the background? We like our self-indulgence and our reliance on power, thank you very much. No thanks to removing our crowns for anyone.

Contemplating the fantastical features of Bosch's painting may also bring to the fore some of the fantastical features in this morning's spectacular gospel text. The magi's story was incubated and their journey was embarked upon based on their curious and hopeful contemplation of the heavens. Their itinerary was partly determined by dreams.

As these magi enter our field of vision today, some of us may wonder about if or how we contemplate the heavens or the meanings and significance of our own dreams. The ways of being of these magi bring to mind a provocative view expressed by Simone Weil in her book *Gravity and Grace*: "*The mysteries of faith are degraded if they are made into an object of affirmation and negation, when in reality they should be an object of contemplation.*"²

I wonder as well if the magi may have felt an affinity with Carl Jung, who introduced his autobiography by saying, "*...the only events in my life worth telling are those when the imperishable world irrupted into this transitory one ... I speak chiefly of inner experiences, amongst which are my dreams and visions.*"³ Among other things, the magi uniquely invite us to wonder about what can variously be called the more intuitive, mystical or right-brained aspects of our faith and our experiences of God.



Along these lines, before we put our Nativity scenes back in storage for the year, we should probably wonder about that star, the one that the magi spotted and followed. And I should probably ask you to notice the star in Bosh's triptych. It's not a blazing star that overwhelms, but it does remain visible overhead, even in apparent daylight. I wonder how many of us are familiar with, or can locate, the stars of that nature in our own circumstances? How many of us persevere in following those stars, even amidst all of the peculiarities, the clamoring voices, the dark forces and warring armies in our lives?

Or maybe we should ask: what star or stars are we following? Whether seen or not, whether we are aware or not, we all DO follow stars. But are we following those that will lead us to the Christ? We will know if they are those that may compel us, when we do come upon the Christ child, to remove our crowns and kneel in adoration, willingly devoting to him the supreme gifts of our own lives.

¹ Ilsink, M., Koldeweij, J., *Hieronymus Bosch: Visions of Genius*, Mercatorfonds; 1st edition, 2016.

² As quoted by Mary Szybist in her book *Incarnadine*, Graywolf Press, 2013.

³ *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, final revised edition, 1973, p. 4.