

Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12
January 5, 2024

“The Three Wise Men that Weren’t”

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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.

Dear Friends, today is the twelfth and final day of Christmas. Tomorrow is Epiphany. Tonight, in Puerto Rico, children will leave boxes of hay under their beds as a snack for the camels with hopes that good presents will be left in their places by the three benevolent kings. In the Philippines, the children will leave their shoes out for the kings to fill. In France, bakers are readying Galettes des rois – special kings cakes baked with a coin, jewel, or toy inside. And in Italy, the kindly witch Befana is preparing for her annual gift-giving flight over the country. Even here at New England, we celebrate the arrival of the three kings by chalking the doors of our sanctuary according to the ancient custom. It's a festive time, a joyful time, a time of celebration and tribute to the three kings that made the journey from the east to the newborn Christ child in the stable with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The only problem is that it never happened – at least not the way we “remember” it.

First, there weren't *three* kings. Well, there might have been, but Matthew's account only states that “wise men from the east” came to Jerusalem inquiring about the child. Later tradition identified them as Caspar, Melchoir, and Balthazar – each one bearing a gift. No big deal, right? Two, three, four, or twelve... it doesn't really matter. A group of kings arrived inquiring about the child. the story is basically intact. Except, not only can't we know how many, we can know for sure that they weren't kings.

Matthew tells us that they were *magos* – magi, wise ones from the East. Magi were members of the priestly caste and adherents to the early Persian religion of Zoroastrianism—the oldest monotheistic religion in the world. Practiced in the ancient art of astrology, the magi searched the night sky for portents signaling important global or cosmic events. Still, this is basically the story we know. A group of wise ones from Persia bring gifts to the Christ child in the stable. Better buckle up for this next “revelation.”

The wise ones never actually saw Jesus in the stable. According to Matthew, they actually visited the child Jesus in a house in Bethlehem. Matthew doesn't seem to know anything about a stable. In fact, Matthew doesn't seem to know anything about shepherds or a great "multitude of the heavenly host"¹ either. There's just a toddler on his mother's knee in a house. So, wise ones from Persia bring gifts to a toddler Jesus in a house in Bethlehem. That's not exactly the Christmas story as we remember it, is it? That's not the Christmas story of Charlie Brown, or of The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, or of the nativity scene right up here in the chancel, featuring three rather kingly looking fellows with gifts in what is without a doubt a stable.

Whether it be Luke's entrancing story about a virgin hearing of an unplanned pregnancy from Angel Gabriel; a visit to her cousin and an earth-changing song about the great reversal God was to accomplish through her child; a census and an ill-timed delivery in a Bethlehem stable; angels and shepherds. Or it be Matthew's tale of gentle Joseph and his dream of an angel's reassurance; his marriage to a pregnant girl named Mary; the birth of her child Jesus in Bethlehem; and sometime later, the visit of wise ones from Persia bringing gifts to Mary and Jesus in their home. Whether it be Luke's version, or Matthew's version, or our version that's usually a combination of both, these stories tell us much more about the theology of the storyteller than they do about the historical events surrounding the birth of Jesus. They tell us more about who the author thought Jesus was than they tell us about who Jesus *really* was – historically was. And that's okay.

It's okay because at its core the Bible is a book of faith and not fact. In its pages we find the stories of communities, written over the course of millennia, that help to explain the origins of life, the origins of a particular people, that people's understanding of the struggle to exist and persist in

¹ Luke 2:13

light of the realities of their historical context, that people's experiences of the Holy and the role of God in their history, and, of course, the entry of Jesus into that history and the unique part he would play in bringing healing and wholeness to the world. The Bible is less a book of objective fact and more a book of subjective experience. And as such, it contains truth for those who wrote it and those for whom it was originally written. And it continues to speak truth to us these many generations later, even as we harmonize Matthew and Luke's stories into one happy get-together at the stable, three kings and all. And that speaks to its quality -- its enduring ability to speak truth into different times and places and historical contexts and peoples.

So, don't apologize for the three kings at the stable on the fireplace in your living room. I won't. Don't feel silly or sheepish for not knowing that only one story contains sheep and shepherds. The Bible isn't interested in facts. It's interested in truth. For us the transcendent truth of the nativity (replete with holy family, sheep and cows and donkey, shepherds and angels, camels and wise ones) is that the very ordinary experiences of life, like birth, are inexplicably holy; that divinity doesn't just exist somewhere *out there*, it becomes flesh and dwells among us, even within us; that there are stars, both literal and figurative, that even in the darkest night will lead wise ones to truth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.