

Another Road

Rev. Linda Michel
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We've all seen the images of the wise men on Christmas cards, each one dressed in different costly robes with elaborate crowns. Their camels have saddles and harnesses that match their outfits as if they might not recognize which camel is theirs. Sometimes they are seen riding in the night toward Bethlehem, guided by a brilliant star. Less familiar are depictions of them paying homage to baby Jesus while offering him gifts. We also might have seen an elaborate depiction with the Magi wearing gorgeous robes and other finery accompanied by a large caravan of supporting cast, either at church or like the one Bob and I recently witnessed at Radio City Music Hall. These images are so firmly implanted in our collective memory we've given them names—Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. But as we have just heard, the evangelist Matthew does not tell us that they were three men or that they were even kings.

The term Magi is a plural form of *magoi* in the Greek language, which means Zoroastrian priests. They were neither kings nor wise men. It's likely they earned the title wise men because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology and astronomy. Since earliest times science and religion have been compatible. Only since the Enlightenment has there been a separation between faith and reason.

Zoroastrian priests were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day who were held in highest esteem even by the Persian emperor. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world. It is still active in Iran today, despite Islam being the official religion. If we dig a little into the history of Zoroasterism we discover that the practitioners usually traveled in large caravans that also included women practitioners. There's an old joke that suggests if the Magi were wise women instead of men, they would have asked directions at the beginning of their journey; got there on time, brought diapers and casseroles *and* helped with the birth. . . .

Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell miraculous births by reading the stars. The evangelist Matthew tells us that Zoroastrian priests followed the star of Bethlehem to Jesus' birthplace to assure his audience that Jesus is a fulfillment not only of Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth, but also virgin birth prophecies of Gentiles. Matthew

presents Jesus as the expected King of the Jews *and* the Gentiles. It was important for Matthew to show that the Magi went to Bethlehem rather than Rome to look for the long awaited Messiah, the King of the Jews.

King Herod becomes greatly troubled to hear from the Magi that the new king for the Jews is born. He knew from the chief priests and teachers of the law that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea, and he must come from the ancestry of David. King Herod does not meet that criteria. Although his mother was Jewish and he was raised Jewish, his father was Idumaeon which precluded him from being considered. He felt threatened and worried about his throne. Herod is at war with himself because a new king is on the scene. He could pretend to be in control until someone or in this case, many someone's appear to show that he is at best a poor substitute for a true king. He traffics in facade, pretense, and appearance. Consequently he would act out of fear, seeking to kill all male children under the age of two. This way, he hoped to eliminate the perceived threat. This seems to always be the way of those who are insecure about their status. They become tyrants who rule, not with justice, but with brutality and oppression. Sadly, it is one of the oldest stories.

One of the commentaries on this text showed me something I hadn't thought about before. The religious leaders of the day knew about the prophecy concerning the Messiah. In fact, they were the ones who told Herod that the star revealed the long believed prophecy about the Messiah. So why didn't they head off to Bethlehem along with the Magi to see for themselves? Bethlehem was not that far from Jerusalem. Why were they also frightened? Was the child a threat to their own power? Seems likely. We have seen for ourselves what can happen when religious leaders use cover up to protect their power.

Epiphany means showing or revealing. The light of the star that the Magi saw rising in the East, showed them the way, first to Jerusalem, then to Bethlehem where Jesus was with Mary. Upon their arrival, they first bowed down before the child, then presented him with gifts—ones we have heard about many times:

- Gold, a sign of kingship, long associated with the gods
- frankincense, costly incense, representing wisdom
- myrrh, a rare perfume that is a sign of healing.

One might believe the Magi had experienced many wondrous events in the past but this experience “overwhelmed them with joy.” Think of the times in your own life when you, too have been overwhelmed with joy. If you’ve been blessed as I have, there have been many. Each one can bring back that feeling when we take the time to remember or something triggers the memory.

I would be remiss if I didn’t mention how sorrow works the same way—not surprising since experiencing joy and sorrow are part of what makes us human. Peak experiences cannot be replicated but there are times when our emotions are stirred by the memory of the event. Maybe a piece of music, a poem, a picture, can bring those feelings to the surface. The joy often comes when we are not expecting it—that’s why it has such a profound effect.

The scene of the Magi finding Jesus can be found imbedded in our worship services. We as Protestants don’t genuflect or bow down, although our ancestors in the faith did—I have an old kneeler that the Trustees of First Congregational in Princeton had planned to discard on one of their cleanup days. I use it every day to climb up into my bed. We do bow our head for our Prayer of Invocation—we offer our gifts in the name of the Jesus—maybe not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but our gifts of money are used in ways to honor Jesus’ call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and release those in bondage. The accumulated wisdom found here has helped withstand the challenges of today’s world, while the love and shared prayers bring profound healing for those in need.

There are too many beloved Christmas carols to name a favorite but “In the Bleak Midwinter,” has a verse that never fails to bring tears to my eyes when I remember the first time I sang it. My life’s circumstances had changed greatly at the time. No longer was I able to support my beloved church with significant financial gifts. Because of our traditions around keeping financial support secret, no one in the church but the treasurer knew that my giving had been reduced nearly seventy-five percent but I did and was filled with shame for letting the church down. Then came that carol:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise One, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.

The tears overflowed but in that moment I experienced great joy—I knew that I had already given and would continue to give my heart to Jesus—again and again and again.

The Season of Epiphany is the time of showing what *is* at the heart of the Christmas story, the gift of God's own self to the world—for all people, Jews, Gentiles, ALL people, no exceptions. It is the gift of love for each of us with no need to fear that there is less for us when others receive the same gift. What I have found, and maybe you have as well—the more love we give, the more we receive.

After the Magi had worshipped Jesus and presented their gifts, they took some time to rest—what wise ones they were. It was in that time of rest when they were shown in a dream not to return to Herod. They wisely chose another road home. For we who often fail to take the rest we need, it seems a very wise thing for us to do, to take the time to think about another road, one that will bring great joy., not only to us but others.

There is much work ahead of us. As you continue your search for a new pastor may you be open to another road that may be a bit different from the one you have traveled many years. There are so many people who are looking for a new way to live their lives. So many who are lost and lonely; so many who believe no one cares. You can show another way, one that leads to a better life.

As I mentioned last week, Howard Thurman, with the Gospel in mind, has provided a map for us to follow so we don't get lost along the way:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

The other road is one we call The Way. The light of Jesus' love goes before us, leading us to another way home and great joy. May it be so.

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.