

Epiphany Sunday

January 6, 2019

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

A Camel on the Roof?

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. – Matthew 2:11

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.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

God of the winter sky, place a star on our horizon. We need to lift our tired eyes and weary souls from the multitude of tasks, resolutions, and lists. Help us glimpse your wonder, to be struck in awe and to marvel at your love. God of the winter sky, place a star on our horizon, In Jesus' sake. Amen.

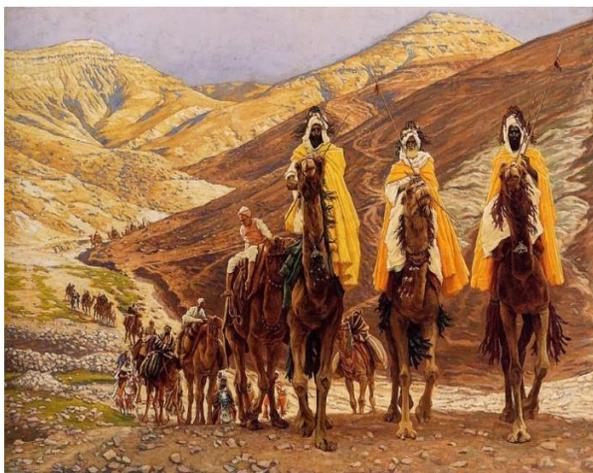


They are by far the most exotic figures in the Christmas story with their mysterious origins, their prescient dreams, and, of course, their fabulous costumes. The poet, Yeats described them as “stiff painted clothes...” with “their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones.”ⁱ John Milton, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams all memorialized them. In 1629, when Milton was just 21, he wrote:

*See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet:
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet.*ⁱⁱ



Nearly all the great artists have painted them, Botticelli to the left, and Durer to the right.



Here on the left is one of my favorites, by the 19th century French painter, James Tissot,

and Contemporary artist, He Qi (Hay Chee) on the right.



But who were these strange night visitors? And what does their coming mean for the story of God’s salvation? The gospel never calls them kings, although there is a strong connection between them and the prophecy that Laura read for us from Isaiah. Gold, frankincense and myrrh...those were the gifts of kings.

Still it's much more likely that these seekers were Zoroastrian priests. *Magos* is the Greek word Matthew uses...in Latin *magi*. They were educated men who studied the movements of the stars and used astrology, which was considered a science in that day, to advise kings and generals. It wasn't until the King James Bible in 1611 that they were first called "Wise Men."

They came from the East, that much we know -- from what is modern day Iran, Iraq or Saudi Arabia. They arrived in Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews, and they found him. Herod, the Great, was Rome's client king in Judea. The Empire allowed Herod to remain in as long as he syphoned off sufficient money to keep the fat cats wealthy and remembered who was ultimately in charge. And Herod was really good at playing both ends against the middle. He built fortresses, palaces and an impressive Temple to boost Israel's national pride, but he was also a paranoid narcissist. Infamously cruel, Caesar is said to have remarked that he would rather be Herod's pig than his son. He had three of his own sons murdered, as well as all the infant children of Bethlehem. All in all, the Magi were lucky to escape with their lives after saying to his face:ⁱⁱⁱ

Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star...and have come to pay him homage.

These are – by the way -- the first words humans speak in the gospel of Matthew. What they ask is a question, but it is also an affirmation of faith, a declaration that something entirely new has taken place, something cosmic in impact and scope, something that demands a response.

How did they know? Barbara Brown Taylor says, "They had stars in their eyes." I like that. "Something beyond was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives."^{iv} Theologians call this an epiphany...it's a discovery or revelation.

We don't know exactly how it all unfolded, but we know the Magi were seekers. They were also students and scholars. They knew astronomy, literature, and history. In the year 37 BC the Roman poet Virgil wrote his Fourth Eclogue (Ek'-log) a poem about the coming of a child from heaven whose birth would issue in a new age. Scholars of the day remarked at the similarities between the eclogues and Isaiah's prophecies. Roman historians Tacitus and Suetonius wrote of the expectation of a world leader who would arise out of Judea.

It was commonly believed that a sign from the heavens would accompany this special birth, and there were plenty of cosmic signs. Halley's Comet had recently made its circuit through the skies. Saturn and Jupiter aligned three times in three years prior to Jesus' birth. All this would have fueled Herod's paranoia. A year before Jesus' birth Chinese astronomers recorded seeing a supernova, a bright light suddenly appearing in the night sky.

The Magi were seekers of scientific AND spiritual truth. It's sad to see how some have separated science and spirit in our day. Listen – science is our friend here at Woods and among the Presbyterians. The Magi were seekers of scientific and spiritual truth.

With Epiphany comes the question:
Where should *we* look for God? In the elegance of the universe? Or in a cattle stall? Yes.

Walter Burghardt, a Catholic theologian, shared a story from a collection of the lives of saints – in this case, the saints of Islam. There was a king of Balkh (now northern Afghanistan) named Ebrahim ibn Adam. He was very rich. At the same time he sincerely sought to be rich in the things of the spirit such as prayer and generosity, as well.

One night the king dreamed that he heard the sound of something stomping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: “Who's up there?”

“A friend,” someone shouted from the roof. “I've lost my camel.”

Perturbed by what seemed like stupidity, Ebrahim screamed: “You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?”

“No, you are the fool,” the voice from the roof answered. “You are looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a golden bed.”

Those simple words filled the king with such terror that he rose from his sleep to become one of the most remarkable of all the Sufi saints.^v

So where are you looking -- for *your* salvation?

There are people who will tell you that security is the most important thing, feeling safe from harm. That was Herod's quest. Others believe that status makes all the difference – degrees, achievements, accomplishments. Still others suggest that what we ought to be seeking is fun and recreation – sports, the boat, vacations. Still others believe salvation can be found in the love of family.

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of those goals, but if they are all you want, if those become your ultimate quest, you will always be disappointed. You will be like the friend looking for his camel on the roof...searching, seeking, but never finding...full, yet always craving more.

There is a God-shaped space in each of us, a space that can only be filled and fulfilled with perfect love, which is the glory of God. That is what the Magi sought. They came a long way, these seekers did. T.S. Eliot has them say:

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms
But no longer at ease.”

Of course they weren't. How could they go back to the way they were? They had found perfection and held him in their arms. After that, they had to change their plans and return home a new way, not Herod's way, but a different way.

ⁱ William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), “The Magi” www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/magi

ⁱⁱ John Milton “On the Morning of Christ's Nativity” <https://interestingliterature.com/2018/11/28/on-the-morning-of-christs-nativity-a-poem-by-john-milton/>

ⁱⁱⁱ James Howell, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1* Westminster John Knox, 2008, 206

^{iv} Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, Cowley, 1999, 28

^v Walter Burghardt, SJ, *Still Proclaiming your Wonders*, Paulist Press, 1984,55