



From the Community Pulpit

December 7, 2008

MAGI:
*Wandering and Wondering
Under the Star of Peace*

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Pastoral Prayer by Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Communion Invitation by Rev. Kevin Snow

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Matthew 2:1-12 – 1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 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." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 "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."

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 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." 9 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. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON by Robert Lee Hill

As today is Peace Sunday within the broader reaches of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), how appropriate it is that we continue our Advent-Christmas sermon series – "*Meet Me at the Manger!*" – with a consideration of three of the most peace-loving characters in the first Christmas experience.

Our focus on the Magi, based on Matthew's account of their participation in the Nativity drama, will help us understand what it is to have a generous, seeking heart and what it is to elude the dangers of an unquiet and often violent world by the guidance of a star of peace. But first I have some questions I'd like to ask you:

- Have you ever really wanted something really bad?
- Have you ever awaited the arrival of someone or something with your heart stuck in your throat and your palms wet with sweat?
- Have you ever searched for something, say a Christmas gift, high and low, far and wide, for a long, long time?

If you can answer "Yes" to any of these questions then the Magi's experience will resonate with yours. The Magi, quintessential gif-givers, journey-makers, evaders of the minions and madness of Herod – these "wise men from the East" – wanted and waited and

wearied themselves to the nub before finally arriving at the Bethlehem manger. And *what* they found there, as well as *how* they found what they found are lessons for us all.

But first let us ask after the meaning of the strange characters – the only non-Jews to visit the holy family and the only ones to tender gifts to the infant Jesus.

MAGI– Whether we call them Magi or Wise Men or by their legendary names, you have to admit that they are a strange group. But who were they, and why "Magi" in the first place?

(1) Some folks, like Bible translator James Moffatt, believe they were magicians, ¹necromancers, familiar with sorcery and acquainted with wizardry.

(2) Others hold they were Persian priests otherwise known as *magians*, very likely followers after the Zoroastrian faith. ²

(3) Still others, like Edgar J. Goodspeed, believe they were astrologers. ³

And the main conclusion? Astrologers, very probably, not unlike those who produce the horoscopes some read on a daily basis, trying to guide their lives by "what the stars say." Astrologers were considered variously as learned men of supposed science and/or as charlatans. In this case, most scholars sense that these magi were of the first

variety, seeking to seize upon a magnificent new experience foretold by a brilliant star.

How many Magi were there, really?? Three, we assume, but we do so only because of the number of gifts. An actual number is never given. Various traditions have speculated that there may have been as many as twelve magi who made the trip to Bethlehem from exotic locales throughout the Middle East. The main tradition that has prevailed says that there were three because of the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

NAMES - Over the centuries, and particularly since Ignatius of Antioch in the third century, various names have been given to the Magi. *Gaspar*, *Melchior*, and *Balthasar* are the most famous, and they represent some wonderful meanings about the significance of inclusion related to Jesus' birth.

Gaspar is said to have come from India.

Melchior is understood to have hailed from Persia.

Balthasar is reputedly from Arabia. ⁴

THE STAR - Now, the star is one of the most interesting "characters" in the entire narrative in Matthew. Silently spanning the skies above the magi's gaze, not unlike those stars the shepherds must have gazed upon during their watchful keeping of their flocks by night, the magi's star has abided as an exciting enigma to professional scholars and lay students of the Bible for centuries.

Some have speculated that there must have been a star, say something like Halley's comet, or Halley's comet itself, that guided the magi along their long trek to Bethlehem. By astronomical calculation Halley's comet did circulate throughout the Middle Eastern area, but around 12 years before Christ's birth.

Others have insisted that a supernatural coagulation of stars or novas or supernovas caused the brilliant sky-lit spectacle that captured the magi's attention.

However the bright light may have guided them - whether as a "close encounter of the third kind" or as a holy signal - what is sure is that the magi followed that light not unlike astrologers might do even today.

GIFTS - The most intriguing aspect of Matthew's story, however, may be found in the three gifts that were tendered from their hands.

Gold - meaning kingly, monarch-related, and thus a very appropriate gift since they had come to worship and adore the "king of the Jews," as they told Herod they would.

Frankincense - from the *Boswellia* tree bark which, when cut, emits a white resin which was used in worship ceremonies. This kind of gift points to

that which is appropriate for worship in a sanctuary since frankincense (or something very similar) was used in worship ceremonies at the time.

Myrrh - an aromatic gum from the small tree of the *Commiphora* species. Not a hot-dish, as the inhabitants in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, might believe, but rather anointing oil. Which is so very right for the "Anointed One." Such a gift also references the forthcoming death of Jesus, since myrrh was used in the preparation of bodies for burial in Jesus' time.

SOME CONCLUSIONS - There is so much legend and so much accrued tradition that we can't say for sure what exactly happened with all the star speculation, and we can't really secure detailed information about the Magi themselves. But there are some things we can know for sure:

(1) The coming of Christ and the reaction to his presence are no abstractions.

The story of the Magi reveals that Christ's coming into the world happens in real time ("in the days of King Herod") and in a real place (in Jerusalem and in Bethlehem) and in connection with a real religion (they were searching for the one who would be "King of the Jews") and with real politicians being upset about real disruptions to their rule and reign.⁵ As much as we may love the soaring theological concepts conveyed in John 1:1ff ("In the beginning was the Word") the specifics of Matthew's nativity account help us to see the reality of the Incarnation. In light of that reality we know that our faith is neither a fairy tale about fanciful times and places, nor "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."⁶ But rather, this is a real story about real human beings like you and me, full of pathos and mysterious grandeur and strange twists.

(2) The magi open themselves to reverence and awe.

One of the most repeated depictions throughout the history of painting is "The Adoration of the Magi." And this is remarkable if only because the magi are not Hebrews! The King of the Jews wouldn't necessarily be their king! And yet they open themselves to reverence and awe and adoration by offering the baby Jesus their obeisance and homage.

(3) It really does come down to the GIFTS!

(A) The Gifts They Bring - The gifts they bring show that the "dividing wall between races and cultures [is] breaking down."⁷ The birth narrative at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, what with its inclusion of the magi from the east and its distancing from worldly, political power, anticipates Jesus' inclusive embrace of all of

God's children throughout his life, ministry, death and resurrection, which is topped off by the soaring inclusiveness of the Great Commission to "go into all the world" (Matthew 28:19).

(B) *The Gifts They ARE for Christ* - Did you notice how the Magi shield Jesus and his family from certain doom when they choose not to return to Herod and snitch on where they found the Christ Child? Either wily because of a dream or sensitive souls who always had dreams visit them with premonitions and warnings galore, the magi give the baby Jesus the gift of life just by being there and watching out for his welfare.

(C) *The Gifts They Receive* - Then there are the gifts they're searching for. This is the heart of their reasons for trekking through so much territory and with so much danger lurking near them along their way. They were searching, some scholars believe, for two years. What kept them going? What did they want? What were they seeking to receive? They were looking for what we all want and need and must have in order to say our lives are fulfilled:

- Love in all of its splendor is what they received. Love from God's heart to our hearts. Love and trust that the star they were following was truly a guide that would lead them to true peace and genuine wholeness and a life in which grace was really real and not merely a jumble of words.
- Love in the form of a baby is what they received, underneath a star of peace that hovered and caressed them with its brilliance, so the text says. Nothing about the names, or the coagulation of supernovas. No, none of that. Just the simple gift of love-lasting love, wonder-filled love, gentle, kindness-making love, love that isn't restricted, love that never runs out, love that goes on forever. Love that is for everyone whether not they know a smidgeon of religion.

Remembering Precious Gifts - When I was young our family carried on a tradition that my mother and her family had started during their growing up years in the Depression. This tradition dumb-founded me and actually disturbed me for a few years until I understood what was taking place in their gift-giving heritage. You see, they put oranges and tangerines and grapefruits in our stockings. I never understood why this was such a good gift, since we had citrus trees in our backyard that would yield all these fruits.

In no way were these delicacies or exotic gifts. To a kid from Brownsville, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley oranges, tangerines, and grapefruits were as plentiful as the sandy loam they grew in.

But the family would gather, and the stories would ensue, and the stockings would be passed around and then I would learn that the fruits of a bygone generation were being tendered to a new generation with the same intent: to show forth a great love.

Not unlike what the Herdman family offer in Barbara Robinson's famous novella, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. This Christmas classic opens with the great line, "*The Herdmans were absolutely the worst children in the history of the world.*" The Herdmans are a rowdy gaggle of children, ill-kempt and even worse in their individual and collective temperaments. In dress, manners, and all interactions, they were terrors. Including at the church upon which they would visit their raucous behavior. But at this church, they sensed something was different. We can't see exactly what they sensed until the end of the book and the Christmas pageant which gives the book its title. Now the Herdmans, despite their despicable ways, were the object of pity and received a Christmas ham from the benevolence committee. At the climactic moment in the pageant when the Herdmans are to make their entrance as magi bringing their gifts to the baby Jesus, the pageant goes experience a miracle. For in the hands of the Herdmans, as their gift to the baby Jesus, is their own Christmas ham. And it's easy to see what has happened: because of the love and welcome and care they received from the church and because of the wonderful sense they have made of the mystifying Christmas story itself, they give their very best gifts. Because of what they have received. Simply because of what they have already received.

How is it with your gifts list this year? Are you searching high and low for just the right gift? Could it be you already have the just-right gift? Could it be that you don't have to be "that guy," as the Helzburgtg commercial puts it? You just need to be yourself and give what you can, something you've already received from the Ultimate Provider, better than anything you can purchase online? And what would it be that the Ultimate Provider would offer? Perhaps Christina Rossetti puts it best:

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, long ago.*

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

May it be so, for all of us. May we who are also wondering and wondering under the star of peace this year, seeking the baby Jesus, give from our hearts in response to what our hearts receive – the grace of unconditional love which helps us all to make sense of our lives and life itself.

Amen. May God bless one and all this Christmas.

NOTES

- 1 *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume III (New York, Abingdon, 1962), p.13
- 2 Robert R.A. Hare, *Matthew* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993) pp. 12
- 3 *IDB*, p.13
- 4 Hare, *Matthew*, pp. 12-15
- 5 *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp. 138-145
- 6 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5
- 7 *NIB*, p. 145
- 8 Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1972), p.1

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Communion Invitation by Rev. Kevin Snow

Shel Silverstein has written many wonderful books, but one of my favorites is *The Missing Piece*. As the story begins, a circle finds itself missing a wedge shaped piece (think of Pac-Man if you're having difficulty visualizing this image). Due to this missing piece, the shape moves along at a much slower pace, allowing it to spend time with other slow movers like butterflies and beetles. The piece also likes to sing as it searches for its missing piece, "Oh I'm lookin' for my missin' piece, I'm lookin' for my missin' piece, Hi-dee-ho, here I go, Lookin' for my missin' piece. The piece searches high and low, through jungles and swamps, up and down mountains, trying and rejecting several ill fitting pieces along the journey. One day the shape finds a piece that fits perfectly, and it is overjoyed. Unfortunately, now that it has been filled, it cannot roll as deliberately as before, and cannot stop to be with beetles and butterflies. The shape also finds that it is unable to sing its favorite songs now that it has been filled. We come to this communion table today in a similar situation. We are all looking...searching...desperately seeking out our missing piece. At this table, we celebrate that our missing piece has been filled by Christ. When the shape in Silverstein's story becomes whole, it is happy for a time, but it quickly reenters the world in order to empty itself, and begin its search all over again. So too are we filled at this table, then called immediately back into the world, called to empty ourselves before God and neighbor, and begin our search for our missing pieces anew.

Pastoral Prayer – Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Source of Light & Life,

You have awakened us from our slumber & given us reason to arise from our sleep.

Like the Magi from the East traveling to Jerusalem, we seek to pay the Christ child homage by opening our heart & minds & spirits to the witness of his life and teachings.

Like the Magi from the East traveling from Jerusalem, may we return from our encounter with the Christ child in this place more attuned to your direction for our lives.

Your presence in this place is abounding—
through the voices of children

through the touch of those we know well
& of those we meet today for the first time.

through the beauty of the evergreens
through the words & melodies & harmonies of song
through your word prayed and preached
through the gifts we feel called to share
through the loaf & the cup which bind us together at one table.

As we worship amidst the glow of candles lit for hope & peace, we remember places where peace seems more elusive (and is ever more important!) than the perfect gift or a delicious fruitcake. We pray for peace in Iraq & Iran & Afghanistan; in Israel & Palestine; in Mumbai, India; within the borders of this country and even this community, where violence & poverty & injustice continue to make peace more a dream than reality.

As surely as our prayers are heard may our actions and presence in this world mirror & promote the peace we seek to co-create with you, O God.

As we worship amidst the glow of candles lit for hope & peace, we pray for those throughout the world whose lives are changed by HIV & AIDS; we pray for those who experienced the attacks on Pearl Harbor 67 years ago today & for all those whose lives have been touched by the effects of war.

As surely as our prayers are heard may we raise our own awareness of the ways in which war & disease afflict your children, O God.

As we worship amidst the glow of candles lit for hope & peace, we pray for those whose names were spoken aloud & for those we named in our hearts; we pray with hearts filled with joy for those who are coming into this fold as new members today.

As surely as our prayers are heard may we reach out to those for whom we pray that they might know your presence through us.

We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus the Christ, whose birth we joyfully anticipate. Amen.