

## Home by Another Way

### Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the Magi, the mysterious travelers from the East, is a story that catches the imagination of many of us. Storytellers and poets, painters and sculptors, have wrapped words and images around this visit described in the Gospel of Matthew. Though the Scriptures say nothing about the number of wise men, tradition has settled on three, and Longfellow even gave them names: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar. They were not kings, at least not according to Matthew. And yet we joyfully sing the carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," perhaps in deference to the passage in Isaiah 60 that envisions the exaltation of Jerusalem that will come as God's kingdom or God's realm is being established on earth:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you . . .*

*Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. (60:1,3)*

It's intriguing, isn't it, that, according to Matthew, the first people to take note of Jesus' birth are the mysterious wise men. While Matthew is the Gospel most steeped in Jewish tradition, it's interesting that right at very beginning of the Gospel, we have a powerful message of inclusion of non-Jews - Gentiles. That placement of an inclusive message, I am convinced, is very intentional. As the passage from Isaiah 60 reminds us, the ancient Jews were convinced that when God's kingdom fully comes, Gentiles would stream to the holy city of Jerusalem to join in worship and adoration - an event, affirms Matthew, that is indeed being fulfilled with the birth of Jesus. The story of the mysterious travelers from the east, bowing down in worship and adoration, symbolizes that God's kingdom is indeed at hand.

The story serves as a reminder that when Jesus comes as God's highest revelation, that good news is directed not just at one single group of people. Rather, Jesus comes for all humankind. Even at the very beginning of Jesus' life, the dividing walls between cultures and races come tumbling down! Jesus comes, that all manner of people might see life from a new perspective and might experience a new way of living.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the story of the Magi is its conclusion: "Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they left for their own country by another route" (Matthew 2:12). The Magi went home by another way. While the Gospel writer is speaking of alternative geography, I have the sense that, perhaps even more profoundly, the Magi return by another way because they are no longer the same persons. They have encountered a new way of living, a new set of values and priorities, a new perspective towards life.

In his book *The Cup and the Waterfall* Presbyterian author John Killinger shares an incident that occurred in the crowded corridors of an airport late one afternoon, when many were scurrying to meet schedules and make flight connections. The tensions resulting from long days could be seen on many of people's faces that afternoon. For some, tempers were just on the edge, when suddenly, in the midst of the hustle and bustle, a loud voice interrupted them, exclaiming, "Good work, God!" Nearly everyone turned and saw an elderly woman being pushed in a wheelchair by a younger companion, and they noted her gazing out a large glass window. Their eyes followed hers, and they saw a majestic sunset lighting up the sky.

Smiles broke out on many of the faces that hectic afternoon. Shoulders were squared and thrown back, and many began to walk with a renewed bounce in their step. The atmosphere of the entire place was transformed by the woman's observation, "Good work, God!"

Like the rushing folk in that airport corridor, our lives are frequently filled with a host of tasks to accomplish, appointments to reach, schedules to make, and all the “stuff” that focuses our attention on other places and other times. As John Killinger writes, “We miss the here and now for the then and there.”

There was something in the experience and openness of the Magi that allowed them to see what others apparently did not see. Many have argued about that famous star the wise men followed - did it exist? Can it be identified yet today? Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes of the Magi each “sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each one of them.”

It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

You and I have once again celebrated the birth of Jesus, and in the aftermath of the holidays and the continuation of the COVID, there may well be a let-down. Family festivities, while changed, are ended, typical Christmas music over, and decorations have been or will soon be packed away for another year. And sometimes we find ourselves wondering whether it was worth all the bother. And yet, as the German theologian Helmut Thielicke reminds us, “When everything seems to be finished, that is when God’s possibilities begin.” Those Magi, I suspect, had long yearned to draw closer to God. Perhaps they had tried books, magic, astrology, the occult. But they could little plan for this hoped-for, yet unexpected tug. And when they followed that tug, their lives were turned around, redirected, turned upside down.

And so it is with us. It's important to spend time seeking to draw closer to God and one another. But often it's in the unplanned moments that we sense God speaking to us anew. Sometimes it's when we're at our wit's end and ready to give up that, quite unexpectedly, we sense that tug we somehow have been waiting for all our lives. And in that moment, we begin to see as we have never seen before. Perhaps we become aware of a brilliant star. Perhaps we hear the song of the angels. Or perhaps we see the needs of our fellow human beings in ways we had never seen before.

Whatever the case, life is transformed. Annie Dillard, writing in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, describes the grace of God as a waterfall, and us with our cups down under it, trying to catch it in its superabundance. Truth is, we are surrounded by the wonder and the glory of God, but we are so often pre-occupied with responsibilities and tasks to accomplish that we do not open our eyes to the wondrous gifts all around us. Dillard writes, "Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you catch grace as a [person] fills his cup under a waterfall."

In his book *The Power of Perception* Marcus Bach shares an incident from his childhood in a small German Lutheran community in Wisconsin, the kind of community where everybody lived by the rules. It was a warm Sunday morning in early spring, the beginning of the fishing season, and Marcus' father, normally a devout churchgoer, announced that he was going fishing and that he was taking his son with him. The mother was outraged, questioning what others will think and say. The father didn't care; despite his wife's protests, he was going, and he was taking his son.

Marcus recalls the excitement - and the guilt. Surely, he told himself, God wouldn't like him to be fishing on the Sabbath. But suddenly Marcus remembered the stories of Jesus calling fishermen as disciples. He realized that "God liked fishing. Jesus liked fishermen." Even more, "God liked this Sunday morning world." And then Marcus realized that God's world included the open road and the fields of new-growing corn, the ponds and the streams, every bit as much as it included the church with its formal times of worship. Standing and smelling the fresh scent of willow trees lining the banks of the pond where his father and he came to fish, the words of a hymn sprang unbidden into his mind:

*Come, thou Almighty King, help us thy name to sing, help us to praise . . .*

The whole world was a waterfall, and Marcus' young mind a cup trying to catch it. As he matured, Marcus would affirm with the psalmist, "My cup runneth over" with blessings. And indeed it does, if only we have eyes to see. Like trying to hold a cup under a cascading waterfall for a drink, we are blessed beyond measure with the grace and goodness of God.

As we participate in the eucharist, let us celebrate the wondrous good news, that you and I are graced with a love and a purpose for living that we cannot create on our own. It comes as gift, if only we have eyes to see. As we embrace the gift, our lives are transformed, and we go home by another way! Amen.

Clay Z. Moyer

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