



“Star Trekkers”

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Hayward, California**

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Matt. 2:13-23 (NRSV)**

ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

The scripture reading today is the gospel lesson for the Feast of Epiphany, which is one of my favorite Christian holidays, and unfortunately gets far too little press these days. The Feast of Epiphany (which is also known as “Twelfth Night” and “Three Kings Day”) falls on January 6 each year—just twelve days after Christmas—which is this coming Tuesday.

As you may know (or may recall from my recent *Chimes* article), there are a wide variety of folk traditions associated with the Feast of Epiphany and the biblical story on which the celebration is based. These traditions and stories have been embellished over time and by various cultures.

I described several of the folk traditions in my recent *Chimes* article, and will say a bit more about the literary developments of the Epiphany story in my sermon. During Fellowship Hour today, as part of our Epiphany celebration, we’ll have a piñata for the kids to enjoy, in keeping with some Hispanic celebrations of Three Kings Day.

For now, we enter into the Epiphany celebration and prepare our hearts and minds for the reading of this ancient story, by singing together verse 1 of “We Three Kings,” which is printed in your worship bulletin.

MUSICAL MEDITATION

“We Three Kings”¹ (v. 1)

Kings of Orient

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 2:1-12 “The Visitation of the Magi”²

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

¹ Public domain

² Matthew 2:1-12, NRSV

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.

SERMON

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When we give Matthew 2:1-12 a close read, we see that the Epiphany story in our minds and culture is an embellishment of the story that we find in the gospel.

For example, there is no stable, shepherds or sheep in Matthew's Christmas pageant. There is, however, a house that is visited by an undetermined number of wise men who bring strange gifts that only a first century king could value.

The Christmas and Epiphany stories that exist in our consciousness and culture are a conflation of Luke's and Matthew's versions of the birth of Christ, and a series of folk traditions and carols passed down for hundreds—and in some cases—thousands of years.

“So where did the three kings come from?” we may ask.

The idea in our minds that there were three Eastern royals traveling to Bethlehem comes to us from the lyrics of the carol, “We Three Kings,” that we just sang.

And where did the composer of the carol get the kings?

New Testament scholar Douglas R. A. Hare says in his commentary on Matthew that the number of magi was extrapolated from the number of gifts described in Matthew 2, of which there were three: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.³

Eventually, through various folk traditions, the three gift-givers were ascribed royal identities, most likely as a result of Jesus' birth narrative began being associated with passages such as Isaiah 60:3,⁴ Ps. 72:10-11,⁵ and Philemon 2:10-11⁶ that make reference to all nations bowing to the Messiah and to Matthew's gospel, which identifies Jesus as messiah for Israel and for all nations.

The wordsmiths among us will appreciate that the Greek term for the visitors at the manger, which is *magoi*, may be translated into English in a variety of ways including the following: "wise men," "astrologers," and "magicians."⁷

Most theologians accept "astrologers" as the best translation, and base their views on historical data from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which reveals that astrology originated in Persia or Babylonia and India, and that Eastern astrologers were proto-astronomers, who studied the stars and who created, read, and interpreted star charts.⁸

While many historians debate the identity and historicity of the magi, most biblical scholars view the magi as Gentiles, whose identities in Matthew's gospel served as a literary and theological device indicating that Jesus had a Gentile following from birth.⁹ In other words, he was more than Jewish prophet; he had international appeal.

Theologian Douglas Hare explains in his book on Matthew's gospel that the names and geographic origins of the magi were embellished over time through folk traditions, until eventually each royal visitor acquired a specific name and origin, including: Melchior, King of Persia; Gaspar, King of India, and Balthazar, King of Arabia.¹⁰

In a manner similar to the way that the visitors developed new and more elaborate meanings, over time the three gifts that the visitors brought also acquired new layers of meaning—meaning which had theological significance. The royal gifts included gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were strange gifts by present-day standards, but they

³ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* in "Interpretation: A Bible Commentary," (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1993) p. 13. C.f., Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 16.

⁴"And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

⁵ "May the kings of Tarshis and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, p. 16. Biblical quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁶ Phil. 2:10-11. "...every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

⁷ M. Eugene Boring, "Commentary on Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 140.

⁸ Boring and Craddock, p. 16.

⁹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* (New York: Harper One, 2007), p. 144.

¹⁰ Hare, p. 13.

were highly valued in ancient times, and considered symbols of wealth and religious and political power.¹¹

Gold, as in every generation, was a luxury and a measure of wealth. Myrrh was bitter, perfumed oil used as incense by Temple priests, and for healing and anointing the sick and penitent. Myrrh was also an expensive burial spice,¹² which in the context of Jesus' birth narrative foreshadows his crucifixion and death.¹³ The doom and gloom to which myrrh alludes is spelled out in the fourth verse of "We Three Kings."

*Myrrh is mine; Its bitter perfume.
Breathes a life of gathering gloom:
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.*

The third gift of the magi was frankincense, a precious, fragrant resin harvested from rare trees grown in the Middle East, and used only in the sanctuary by the high priests. This gift symbolized Jesus' role as a High Priest in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁴

Regardless of which identity we associate with the magi (wise men, royalty, or astrologers), or how much significance we associate with the gifts that the magi brought, the unifying themes of the Epiphany narratives, which are shared across cultures and time, include these: The Eastern travelers followed a magnificent star to mendicant's birth. They brought him the kind of gifts fit uniquely for a king. Along the way, they encountered a tyrant who sought the demise of the infant messiah, but having been warned in a dream to return home by a different route, they were spared Herod's wrath and foiled his plot.

II

Given the numerous cultural and literary interpretations associated with the Epiphany story and the effort needed to understand and interpret the story, we could miss the meaning of the magi's visit to the manger. So as interesting as the details of the story may be, I invite us to take a step back from these and from the press of literary and historical analysis, and attend to the larger themes and insights inherent in the passage.

UCC pastor David E. Butler does a nice job of recapturing both the mystique and the meaning of this ancient story for our time in his reflections on the magi in *Seasons of Hope*. Here Butler writes:

Our imaginations have always been drawn to this trio. It must have been a sight, strange even then. We picture them on camels, three grand figures moving

¹¹ Hare, p. 14.

¹² In John's account of Holy Week, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

¹³ Hare, p. 14.

¹⁴ Hare, p. 14.

across the landscape in colorful robes and the kind of strange hats fit only for Magi. Old and learned, yet open to miracles and the voices of prophecy from a faith not their own, they are the archetypal pilgrims. They follow signs in the heavens. They read the ancient books. They understand mysteries and magical powers. They arrange their lives around omens and portents. And so they find this tiny miracle in a stable that everyone else has missed.

The Magi walked in the light of a sky lit by a single star. Radiant beyond any other, that star drew them across hundreds of uncharted miles and through dozens of strange cities. Who knows how these sages managed to follow a star? Who knows what they thought they would find, or what they thought they would do when they found it. But don't we all follow stars in our lives? Don't we chase after dreams, even if they are a little vague or unlikely, hoping and wishing that they might come true? Don't we all chase after our own secret notations of what we're meant to be, at least half believing that some fate has our lives in its grasp? Don't we all long for some special miracle in our lives: the knight in shining armor, the beautiful sleeping princess, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the living happily ever after?

Somewhere in our souls or spirits or hearts, God has placed a star for us to follow. It's a star called longing, a star called faith. We long for a truth to live for, and we believe that there really is one. We long for something that will give peace to the places where we ache and agonize, and we believe that there really is one. We long for something that will give peace to the places where we ache and agonize, and we believe there is such a peace. We long for a sign that love is stronger than hatred in the world, and we believe in our God of love. We long for some place to bow down and give our gifts, and we believe that there is such a place. And so we are seekers. We are star followers. We are pilgrims; journeyers of faith; wrestlers with doubts; seekers after truth; travelers on a road of uncertain destination. We have no map. We have no directions. We have no guide. We have only a star that God has placed in our souls; and a call to follow. But the promise is that there are miracles to discover. There is the very presence of God to touch us. There is a new birth waiting out there that can change all of our lives.¹⁵

III

I'm fond of Butler's riff on the magi, because it recaptures a sense of the wonder and awe associated with the first Epiphany and the true and timeless spirit of this feast day, which I hope and pray at least occasionally catches hold of us.

To the post-modern mind, the magi are an enigma to be sure. Their origins are veiled, and their identities are multivalent. Those who like their facts nailed down may dismiss the magi as fictional characters in a foreign fable, and this dismissal is understandable and unfortunate. But those who know that truth is more than the product of a math

¹⁵ David E. Butler, "The Magi," in *Seasons of Hope*. (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998) p. 29.

equation or the result of a laboratory test may receive gifts from the magi that are timeless and prolific. The magi's gifts to all of us are ultimately the gifts of wonder and awe.

The magi direct our attention skyward. They rekindle our interest in the stars. They encourage us to ponder new possibilities. They invite us to befriend the unknown. They prod us to ask "Why?" And they point us in new directions and urge us to try new paths.

If the magi would come in our time, they might come as religious pilgrims, non-governmental advisors to the United Nations, or physical cosmologists. They might be intelligent people who stay on spiritual quests in spite of jabs from the intelligentsia who say that God is dead and religion is the opiate of the people. They might be scientists and philosophers who press the limits of human knowing, trusting that God is still speaking through scientific and intellectual inquiry. And they might be people who promote peace based on justice, rather than peace based on military might or fright.

In short, if the magi would come in our time, and—as it turns out—they do, they are conspicuous and unconventional in their appearance, their intellectual and spiritual curiosity causes them to stand out in a crowd, and their *avante garde* approaches to the future are typically seen as foolish rather than wise. Yet the future—God's future—belongs especially to them, because they are able to grasp where God is going and how God is calling us all into a heaven on earth that could be ours if we would help build it.

These modern magi are "star trekkers." They look for signs and wonders. They dare to think outside the box, stretch beyond their home culture, and journey off the beaten path. Their very character and behavior provoke us to become star gazers and star trekkers too. They remind us that we are all on a journey, that there is value in stopping and asking for directions, and that new truths can burst forth in unlikely places and among unknown people. The magi teach us that we all bear gifts, that we are all capable of discovering new truths, and that it is possible to be transformed by the Christmas message and move on from this event forever changed.

The magi remind us that we have this archetypal quest in common. We share this sense of yearning and of wonder—not only with the ancients, but with each other in this room and with persons around the world. They remind us that we can learn from and support each other on the journey, and encourage our children and invite others to join us on the way.

This is what the Epiphany story is all about. It is about the big themes, and not about the small nuances, that make this story so poignant. It's about a timeless invitation to become star trekkers, about looking heavenward for signs and wonders, and about us being on a journey, bearing gifts, and gaining insight—individually and together. Epiphany is about us exploring and discerning deeper truths, choosing different paths for our futures, and living into the hope that God holds for all of us. This is Epiphany. This is what the feast is about. This is what we celebrate today. Amen.