

- Jeremiah 31:7-14
- Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a
- Matthew 2:13-15,19-23
- or Luke 2:41-52
- or Matthew 2:1-12
- Psalm 84 or 84:1-8

So do we love our wise men or what? You know, I think I am hard pressed to think of characters in scripture who makes such a brief cameo, but who have inspired more imagination and folklore than our beloved magi. We've given them a starring role in our manger scenes, in our Christmas pageants, and in our creches, including our very own festival of gifts where we placed them right in front alongside the sheep and the shepherds and the manger, even though they were never mentioned in Luke's Nativity story at all.

We've turned them into kings, though Matthew never mentions such a title. We've even decided there were only three of them because they gave three types of gifts. We've even given them names. Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar are really cool names. We've spun tales about the different countries they've come from; Persia, India, Babylonia, though Matthew merely says they're from the East.

What's more, there are plenty of biblical scholars who would argue that Matthew's account, even after we strip it of all of these myths we've added, is itself very likely apocryphal. In their view, Matthew is an evangelist, not a historian, and he is far less interested in an accurate accounting of the facts than he is in converting skeptical Jews by presenting Jesus as the new Moses.

John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, for example, refer to this story as a parabolic overture. That is Matthew's Nativity story sets the stage by deliberately paralleling the infancy stories of Jesus and Moses in order to prepare his Jewish audience for the larger opera that is to come. That this helpless, vulnerable child is indeed the Messiah who will free us from the pharaohs of our day and lead us to the Promised Land of our time. Though this time it won't be found in geography for a select few, but in a new heart and a new consciousness available to all.

Whether the magi are part of a parabolic overture or whether they are actual historic accounts or something in between, I decided some time ago that when I am asked about these kinds of stories and scripture that my response would be something like this. I don't know if it happened that way, but I know that it's true. That is, rather than get caught up in working out fact from fiction, history, from mythology, I would instead focus on its meaning. What are the deeper spiritual truths about life and about God that scripture is trying to convey? And most importantly, how might the inspired word of God, when I let it, inspire me to a life of greater compassion and greater love.

So what truths are being revealed in this story today? What does the journey of the magi reveal to us about our journey? The first revelation I hear is Matthew's continued warning against religious complacency. Like his account of John the Baptist just a few weeks ago where he is accusing religious authorities of being a brood of vipers. Because for all their religiosity, the Pharisees and the Sadducees remained utterly untransformed. Here again, I hear Matthew presenting the religious insiders. In this case, it's Herod, the King of the Jews and the chief priests and the scribes, all experts in the scripture.

I hear him presenting them as, once again, being utterly blind to what God is doing in the world. And who are the people that get it? Strange magi from foreign lands. And while scholars still debate if they were more astrologers than astronomers, more soothsayers than scientists, what is abundantly clear is that they are the quintessential outsider. Non-believers, pagan mystics, secular humanists, crystal gazing, new agers from San Francisco. Call them what you will, but the point to notice is that they are the only ones to get it. It's Matthew's reminder to the religious insiders of his time and ours. In other words, all of us, that those who have the scriptures can also be the first to miss their point.

Look no further than the centuries it took the church to stop using the Bible to justify antisemitism and even slavery and how large parts of the church today continue to use scripture to justify treating women, divorcees, and LGBT folks in the same way the Pharisees and the Sadducees treated Samaritans and lepers.

As outsiders, these wise men are free from such religious baggage. They've never been to church. They've never been indoctrinated with a theology of who's in and who's out, who's saved and who isn't. No, they are free to listen to their hearts, to be open to bigger possibilities about the reach of God's love. And as a result, they are the only ones who notice the sign pointing to the new thing God is doing in the world.

And they revealed something else to us, that it's not enough just to be attentive to God's signs. We must be prepared to follow them and even sacrifice to do so. Even if we have no idea where we are headed or what will be there when we arrive.

It's easy, I think, to gloss over in this familiar story just how arduous such a long journey from the East would have been in this ancient world. TS Elliot, the writer, the poet, tried to do so in his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. And interestingly, he, too, himself was in many ways an outsider, a seeker, just as these men were. He didn't convert to Christianity until midlife. And upon doing so was inspired to capture the inner and outer journey of seeking and sacrifice from their perspective. He writes:

A cold coming we had of it,

Just the worst time of the year

For a journey, and such a long journey

The ways deep and the weather sharp,

The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

The Journey of the Magi, like all the journeys in scripture, is a reminder that God never invites us to the easy or to the expected road. The star we should look for is the one that leads us to the unknown, to disorienting places and disquieting experiences where there are no safety nets, no Google Maps, no sure thing to rely on but the God who led us there, and the God who waits for us when we arrive.

And notice what do they do when they arrive? They rejoice and throw themselves to the floor in awe and wonder. If you are someone who genuflects at the sacrament or bows as the cross goes by in church, you are echoing the response of these strange magi who knew nothing about church etiquette but were instead reacting as anyone might who comes face to face with the glory of God. It happens in moments of great joy and great suffering, doesn't it? Great love and great sadness. Those moments when life brings us to our knees.

At our Christmas Eve services, Father Bill described Mary as perhaps the first Christian because she bore Christ within her. Well, if she's the first Christian, perhaps the magi were the first converts, and perhaps this moment of awe was the beginning of their conversion as it is our own.

And what did they do next? After all this sacrifice and the arduous journey, they don't ask. They give, they give gifts befitting a king to remind us that the true King has been born. Yes. Amen. But also, and perhaps more tellingly they demonstrate to us that having seen the glory of the living God, it's not so hard to give up on things that were once deemed so precious. They don't give modestly. They don't give out of obligation or ego. I don't recall Jesus passing the plate. They give up their treasures because the things that they might have once so prized, suddenly pale in the face of the most precious thing of all.

Finally, I hear the magi modeling for us what it looks like to reject, even betray the conventions of power and success of this world. Symbolized by Herod's reaction, our ego and our fear of change. The way we cling to privilege and the status quo are endless attempts at controlling our surroundings and the lives of others. Our readiness to condemn those we deem to be a threat and to even resort to violence, to maintain our way of life. These magi remind us that we are all called to find the courage to leave by a different road.

What is their journey saying to you about yours? Are we attentive to God as we might be? Do we look for the stars that God sends our way or are we too busy to even look up? Are we prepared to sacrifice in order to follow? Or does our love for precious things hold us back? Are we ready to betray the Herods of our life so that we too might leave by a different road?

We are all called to join the journey of the magi again and again and again. No matter our age, no matter our station in life, no matter our health, our wealth, or whether our faith is filled with doubts, or even if it's gathered a bit of dust.

I'll never forget a parishioner a few years ago saying to me, "Father Chris, why all this talk about spiritual journey? What journey? I was born in the Episcopal church. I'm not on any journey. I'm a baked cake. I'm done." Don't be like that. The magi are reminding us to be spiritually curious, to follow the stars, to listen to your dreams. Let your seeker's heart be relit and don't let all the assumptions and small imaginations hold you back.

And by the way, when your kids do this in college, don't panic. Follow their lead that the Holy spirit take hold of your life and lead you to places you never thought you'd go. Where you will come face to face with the awe and the wonder of God's glory once again. Maybe that's why these mysterious wise men have so captured our imagination over the centuries. And yeah, I don't know if it happened this way, but I know that it's true. Amen.

[End of Recording]