

THE REAL TRUTH ABOUT THE THREE KINGS

A sermon by James R Blades
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, California
Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2008
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

*We three kings of Orient are: Bearing gifts we traverse afar—Field and fountain, moor
and mountain—following yonder star.*

Think back on all the Christmas pageants you've ever witnessed and of the manger scenes you ever saw. In all of them are the three kings. Everywhere the Christmas story is told, there they are—bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh—everywhere, that is, except in the original gospel narrative.

Look carefully and you will find that it was not *kings* who visited the manger child but *Magi*, sometimes translated as wise men. You will also find that there is no mention of the number who visited. We know not whether it was three or two or ten. Nor are we sure that they were *men*. One of my pastor friends from Texas goes so far as to suggest that they might have been firefighters because it says “they came from afar.”

In any case, if **the three kings** are nowhere to be found in the original Christmas narrative, how did they get in there? Most likely, the legend was drawn from the ancient prophecy of Isaiah 60:3 which reads:

“Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

As for the number three, well, there were three gifts mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Three gifts -- three givers, right?

Fact is, I suspect the legend of the three kings, which traces back to about the seventh century after Christ, may have been a bit of historical whitewash on the part of a church that felt uneasy about the real identity of these seekers.

When we understand the real truth about who the Magi were, then we get an idea why their presence in the Gospel might have been so unnerving to pious souls. The word *Magi* in the text comes from the original Greek *Magoi* which itself derives from the ancient Persian tongue. It is the root of our English words *magic* and *magician*.

Very simply, these Magi were magicians from the East of Jerusalem: probably Babylon or Persia. These were not the harmless hocus-pocus-slight-of-the-hand magicians that we are most familiar with, but sorcerers who were expert in the occult arts, who read omens, cast spells, interpreted dreams and predicted events by the stars and planets.

Take a look at the book of Daniel and you will find reference to the *Magi*, who were advisors in the courts of the Babylonian and Persian kings where the Hebrews lived in exile.

In the second year of Nebuchadnezzar's reign, writes Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar dreamed such dreams that his spirit was troubled and his sleep left him. So the king commanded that the magi, the enchanters, the sorcerers, be summoned to interpret his dreams.

Do you see why some sensitive souls in the early church might have thought the stately image of Eastern monarchs presented a much cleaner image than that of sorcerers and astrologers? After all, the arts that these men practiced are strictly forbidden in the

Scriptures. People in Christian culture were burned and drowned and hanged for such practices.

So who cares if someone cleaned up the story a bit? I mean, can you imagine a Christmas pageant with six astrologers rather than the three kings? What harm if we substitute sovereigns for sorcerers and so present a more wholesome image? Here's the problem. When the Gospel writer includes a story like this in his narrative, it is not just to spin a yarn. It is to communicate a theological truth. If we drop the element from the story that these magi were who they were, then we risk missing the real lesson Matthew wants to communicate.

And what is the lesson? Is Matthew trying to tell us that there is some kind of legitimacy and efficacy in the occult arts? That God speaks through sorcery and fortune telling and astrology?

No. Matthew was a Jew writing to Jews. It never would have been Matthew's intention to flout the Jewish law by *endorsing* the forbidden heathen arts of the Magi.

Here, rather, seems to be Matthew's message. A message that runs like a thread through all the Gospel narratives—and an astonishing message it is!—that there is no land so distant that the path of salvation does not run out to it, no soul so lost that God's care does not extend to it, no conquest of truth so vain—whether of religion or art or science—that clues of God's redemptive purpose cannot be found in it.

All my life, I've been fascinated by stories of buried treasure. You know, like *Treasure Island* and *Indiana Jones*, where the seeker of rare treasure finds the clue that everyone else overlooks. And that clue leads to other clues which, when deciphered uncover other clues and so on until the path leads to the treasure.

That's not far from the message of this story and God's way with us. God plants evidences even in the remotest places that lead to God's truth. Indeed, wherever a person seeks truth, genuinely seeks it, there are clues that lead the seeker onto the path that leads to God.

"The way of God," said William Temple, "starts where each one stands. We do not have to find its starting place. It starts where we are."

What physicist can study the wonders and workings of this marvelous universe and not begin to contemplate the Spirit behind it all. "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science," said Einstein, "becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest power must feel humble."

What medical student can study the fantastic mechanism of the human body, can read anatomy and histology and not at least begin to wonder how such fabulous ordered complexity came to be created, the mechanizations of even one cell of which baffles scientific imagination?

What student of music can miss the message of God's grace and salvation strewn throughout history's greatest musical achievements, most of which are sacred?

What architect and engineer can fail to bow before the mathematical precision and certainty on which this world is founded?

What lover of nature can nourish her soul with the sight, sound and smell of nature's endless fascinations and not wonder what splendidly infinite mind created it all? Katherine Mansfield, an atheist, wrote of her encounter with the tonic splendor of the

Swiss Alps: “It would seem fitting to utter some grasshoppery expression of wonder and gratitude to someone for all this wonder ... but who?”

There is literally nowhere that evidence of God’s creative power, wondrous care and gracious provision cannot be found.

That certainly is a lesson that comes through the story of the Magi: that God plants clues everywhere, even in the strangest, remotest places; clues which, if followed, lead to God and Christ and truth.

I have a bit of personal experience along these lines that I hope you don’t mind me sharing. I was raised in an agnostic home, much the same as many of you were raised in a Presbyterian or Methodist or Catholic home. By the time I was a college sophomore, I was a full fledged atheist with a chip on my shoulder. It was my mission in life to tear down the faith of my Christian friends. I ridiculed their Bible, poked fun at them when they dressed up to head off to church on Sunday morning while I was nursing a hangover from a party the night before. I wouldn’t be caught dead inside a church. My religious friends later told me that they wondered how God would ever reach me, I was so far out there!

Well, God did reach me and here’s how it happened. One night I was at a party where we were all sitting around on the floor smoking stuff that we shouldn’t be smoking and listening to the Rolling Stones new live album “Get Your Yeah-Yeahs Out.” There and then, in the middle of the festivity the thought suddenly struck me like lightning: here I was at this party supposed to be having fun but I was empty at the center of myself and my life was going nowhere. Then another thought followed right along in its train, that if I gave my heart and life to God, the God that I said I didn’t believe in, that God could fill my emptiness and make a purpose of my life.

I left the party, went back to my dorm room and there all alone sometime past midnight I prayed very simply, “God if you’re really there, I yield my life to you to do with it what you will.”

I’ll be honest with you. I wasn’t sure that anyone was even listening to my prayer. But beginning that night my life began to change and I knew I wasn’t the one changing it.

What’s the point? The point is that I met God where one would least expect to meet God. Not at church but at a psychedelic social. Not listening to Bach but to Mick Jagger; not through the powerful eloquence of a sermon but through a simple thought that maybe God could change my life if I would simply yield my life to God.

I am not recommending that this is a preferable or even tasteful way to meet God. I am only suggesting that God loved me enough to meet me where I was, out where the buses don’t run.

And isn’t that the lesson that the story of the Magi and all the rest of the Gospel teaches? That there is no land so remote that the care of God does not extend to it; no mind so darkened that God’s light cannot reach it, no soul so lost that the grace of God cannot touch to it, no religion or science or art so secular or pagan that some truth, even if fragments, may not be uncovered there which, when followed by the earnest seeker, may lead on to God’s truth and grace and redemption.

There is one other lesson in this story we daren’t miss: The *foreigners* who came seeking the Christ out of the dark of their ignorance, found Him, just as Isaiah prophesied: “The people who walked **in darkness** have seen a great light; those who lived

in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined.¹ But the *Jerusalem establishment* who were supposedly enlightened and learned in the truth, who knew the prophecies of Messiah's birth—knew them so well that they advised the foreigners to find Him—showed no evidence of going to seek out this wonder for themselves. Instead, says this morning's text, "they were frightened." The original Greek is closer to "stirred up internally" or "troubled." Indeed, we are told that Herod, far from going to worship, sent soldiers to destroy the child.

What is the lesson here? That the light of God, the intervention of God, the Advent of God into the affairs and structures and balances of this world, of our lives, even of the religious community, is not always a *welcome* incursion. "He came to his own and his own received him not ..."²

Indeed, here in this morning's narrative, we see the first violent responses of forces which would later recoil on Jesus, who would seek to silence him, put him to death. We are reminded that the biggest danger to the cause of truth is not from those who are ignorant of the truth, who feel around in the dark to find it; not from the doubter or skeptic who honestly seeks the light she or he has not yet found. No, the biggest danger to the cause of truth is to the one who encounters truth but recoils from it; who sees evidence of God but turns from it.

"And this is the verdict," said John, "that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."³

Sometimes not ignorance but knowledge is the soul's nemesis. For with the revelation of truth comes responsibility—to follow the truth wherever it may, inconveniently or unpopularity, lead.

Where in your life right now is God's light shining through? Arise and follow it! Where in your life now is God's truth, ever so small a point of light in the night, breaking in? Pursue and probe it! Where in your life are you hearing the voice of God's call, though ever so still and quiet? Listen and obey it!

For to the one who follows light will more light be given. To the one who responds to truth will more truth be disclosed. To the one who obeys God's voice will more of God's will and wonder be revealed. The journey to the wonders of the manger is always one step, one discovery, one move of faith at a time. It was God's way with the Magi. It is God's way with us.

Prayer

God of amazing wonders and astonishing surprises: Help us to be faithful, as the Magi of old, to the heavenly signs you send us, to the truth you show us, to the counsel you send us. For we remember the Master's words that: "... everyone who searches finds."⁴
Amen.

¹ Isa. 1

² John 1:11-12

³ John 3:19

⁴ Matthew 7:8, in the original Greek tense of present repetitive action.