

Stargazers, Kings, and True Wisdom

Matthew 2:1-12

Someone sent me a cartoon this week, of Maxine, saying “I wish a bright star would appear in the east over Washington, DC. We could use a few wise ones up there!!” With the government shut down – many people working on a hope that a paycheck will come with some backpay eventually, military force used against people seeking refuge, and political maneuvering, even with newly elected congresspeople taking their offices, it’s hard to see any hope. And we should pray for wisdom to prevail. True Wisdom.

Although, I’m not so sure the Wise Ones who went to find Jesus would have been considered all that wise. We don’t know for certain very much at all. We don’t know how many they were. We can be fairly certain that they were not Kings, but rather astrologers with quite a bit of wealth. We don’t know that they knew each other before meeting on the journey as they followed the star that appeared on all of their radars. What we know is that they brought 3 gifts. Whether they had more to give but had to use it along the route or gave everything they had, whether it took them several months or years, whether they ever sought Jesus after that encounter or it was a one-time meeting, whether they ever wrote or told anyone else about this adventure or kept it locked in their hearts – we actually don’t know.

Matthew’s account is the only one who mentions these foreign guests. Matthew was very intentional when writing his gospel to make sure to include the Old Testament texts which demonstrated that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. We experience the materialization of the prophecy of Isaiah 60 – as these foreign guests come to worship the baby. Matthew was writing to an audience of Jews, which is why the Hebrew scriptures are so important, and something that they wouldn’t have missed that I want to make sure we don’t miss either – is that these honored guests who went on a cross country expedition to find the new King, these people who were clued into God’s work in the world, these who were recipients of an angelic dream...they were not Jews. They were not part of God’s chosen people. They were the manifestation of God opening God’s promises beyond the typical boundaries that were expected, assumed, and perpetuated. New Testament scholar Raymond Brown suggests that Matthew left many descriptors ambiguous because he wants us to fill in the blanks with extravagant

answers. Throughout the years, the church, poets, songwriters, artists, pageants, and preachers have embellished, postulated, and considered all that these outsiders represent in a story of salvation, not just for the Jews, but for Gentiles like you and me.

These Magi, Wise Ones, might have been astrologers, astronomers, or priests... they were stargazers. They spent considerable amounts of time looking at the stars, and listening for messages that might come from them. I have not studied the stars since leaving Vanderbilt, where Astronomy was one of my favorite classes. In our home in Spring Hill, Tennessee, I loved to lay outside on our deck and look at the stars, because every night you could see shooting stars. Every time I looked, I was reminded of our Creator and how small me and my problems actually were. It's an act of humility to watch the stars. I hope that each of you have an opportunity in 2019 to go somewhere away from all of our light pollution and look into a night sky, listening for any message that might be coming your way.

The Wise Ones noticed a star in the sky, and they got the message that they should see what it was about. They probably checked out some different holy texts and set off for Jerusalem to greet the King of the Jews, who would inspire such a star. I wonder how much time they spent trying to avoid the trip, maybe checking to see if the star vanished, listening to their friends and family who thought they had completely lost it to believe they should undertake such a journey. I wonder if when they left with camels and treasures to give if they thought about turning back. I wonder if the voices of reason ever echoed in their hearts as they made their way, walking, riding, camping, eating, drinking, walking, riding, finding a nice in...

And they finally make it to Jerusalem. They have enough clout or money to get an audience with the King to inquire – maybe Herod had a baby. The Magi ask King Herod. King Herod, scared out of his wits asks his advisors – who say to check in Bethlehem. Herod decides to use the Magi rather than send out his own troops, hoping they might be more discreet and know where to look...even though they clearly came to the wrong place. And the Magi continued in pursuit of the star, which kept moving until they reached Bethlehem...and when the star stopped – they were overwhelmed with joy – I'm sure for a variety of reasons. They saw the child and didn't have to ask – they knew. Kind of like how they knew when they

saw the star that they had to go. I like to envision these wise ones as pseudo-Godparents, being present, then continuing to love on and send gifts and well wishes throughout his life. Their hearts must have simply melted upon meeting Mary and Joseph, after all, this was clearly not what they had in mind about who the King of the Jews would be. Nonetheless, they exhibited true wisdom in recognizing true power of this child, the magnitude of the moment, and listening not only to stars in the sky, but also angels in their dreams.

But this momentous visit of the Magi also sounded the alarm for jealous King Herod for he was truly terrified of a threat to his reign. And, if such a child could inspire wealthy Magi from across the continent to travel, then who knows what else he could inspire. And our lovely story of the Magi's visit instigates the slaughter of the innocent children – just to be safe – all boys who were 2 and under. Babies torn from their mothers' breasts and their fathers' arms to be killed, just in case they would pose a threat to Almighty Herod. You see, greed and power often pave the way for violence and the deaths of the most vulnerable. Jesus and his parents managed to escape to Egypt, but the other families in Bethlehem were not so fortunate.

On this Epiphany Sunday, the first day of a new year, when many of us take a little more time to reflect and set new goals for our lives – may we learn lessons from the Magi. Beware of placing too high of stock in the powers that reign, for they will almost certainly disappoint. The Kings of this world are more likely to be terrified of losing power than losing the lives of innocent children. May we be cognizant of the ways our actions, in spite of our good intentions, magnify others' propensity for violence and be wise in our conduct so that the most marginalized don't pay the price of our ignorance. May we spend more time gazing at the stars, and listen – even to the messages that may seem a little crazy. May we take adventures to find where God is leading us, near and far to find God-with-us in the most unlikely of places. May we not discount people who are too often overlooked, assuming because others have missed their importance that they are not of sacred worth. May we remember that those who might be considered to be "outsiders" are never outside of God's ability to speak and move and love. And, when we encounter the Divine, may we stop whatever we are doing, and worship, offering everything we've got, and rejoicing for God has not abandoned us. Not now, not ever. Amen.