

Visitors from away (Epiphany) - © Rev Seth Jones

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

In these beginning stories about Jesus, The Gospel of Matthew begs so many questions. I believe this is intentional. The writer of the Gospel wanted us to say, *“That is interesting. Why would that be?”* We keep reading and the story gets deeper and we come across a new piece of the story and ask more questions and keep reading. The funny thing about Matthew’s Gospel, though, is those questions almost never get answered, but it is in the asking of the questions that propel the story forward. It is a sign of very good storytelling. The Gospel inspires curiosity, because Jesus inspires curiosity. The questions we ask become a bridge from one part of the story to the next, a bridge between us, the text, and Jesus. Jesus comes closer to us, to our earthly lives, even as we read of his earthly life so very long ago.

Those questions, though, can become a sticky net, a deep rabbit hole. I have been fascinated by the Magi, the Three Kings, the “Wise Men”, for a long time. In my preparation for today, I noticed a funny thing. The commentaries I read said that the wise men were either Zoroastrian mystics and priests, or they were Babylonian astrologers. This information was written with academic confidence and with no explanation. So I wondered why.

I never found out, because there is no answer but for tradition. In my research, though, I found a way better story of the Magi than astrologers and priests. In fact, the story I found of the wise men was the better known and more popular story for many a century, up until about 600AD.

Before I get to that story, though, I would remind you Matthew relies on dreams and visions again in this story of the Magi. Matthew does this because dreams and visions are universal. Dreams and visions are bridges between the earthly and the divine, between the physical and the spiritual, between one reality and another. With the story of the Magi, we see the bridge-building of God and Christ at work across the world, a universalizing of the presence of God. People, places, other worldviews, other religions, other ways of being all get connected up by way of dreams and visions. This is why they are a big deal for Matthew.

Those bridges get built by Jesus all over the place. Jesus provides channels of access between groups of people who otherwise would never talk to each other:

Easterner to westerner

Women to men

The Poor to the rich

Samaritan to Jew

The possessed and dispossessed to those who possess things and are in possession of themselves

Religious leader and common person

Slave to master

And **this** is the greatest gift the wise men bring. They complete the bridge between Jesus and the world, and Jesus builds this bridge even as an infant.

This whole story, though, is shrouded in mystery. The three kings weren't named until Emperor Justinian in the 500s named them. But Matthew doesn't call them kings. Matthew doesn't even call them men. Matthew calls them 'Magi', which is a neuter term, meaning either men or women, or both men and women. Furthermore, there are three kings, wise men, or magi. How many are there? We don't know. So I find it fascinating and strange and kind of wonderful the back stories we create and then celebrate, even as we will this afternoon with the Boar's Head. In Jewish thought, these are called *aggadah*, or stories about the stories that aren't told in the written story.

So here is the story I want to tell about the magi. This story is very, very old and comes from around 120-150AD, from a strange little document called *The Revelation of the Magi*. It is a story told in the first person, as if it were told by one of the Magi themselves who visited Jesus. More likely, it is a story that was told to a person who told it to others, and then it was written down, which was the way of most stories for most of human history.

As I tell you this story, remember that we are talking about bridge-building.

Long ago, in a land far away, on the far side of the land of Shir, which is likely now modern-day China, a group of men and women lived a holy, silent, and solitary life. There were at least 12 of them, perhaps more. This group of monks and nuns prayed every day, and on the 25th day of each month they climbed the mountain near their monastery and took a ritual bath, and then knelt down and held their arms up to the sky and prayed to God. They were waiting.

In fact, they had been waiting for many, many centuries, for they were the keepers of an ancient prophecy that was given to the third son of Adam and Eve, Seth. Adam told Seth that one day, the Lord would come to earth and take on human form. God would do this for the sake of the whole world and all the world would be transformed by the light of God. And so, since that time, this group of monks and nuns passed on this secret from one generation to the next. This secret was written down and kept in a cave, the Cave of Secrets, along with gifts for the God who became human.

The community did this until one day, on the 25th day of the month 2020 years ago, on the mountain upon which they prayed, a beam of light came down from heaven and became a pillar like fire on the mountain. The monks were terrified, but even so, the light led them into the cave of secrets. There, the light became softer, and as the monks shook with fear, a hand came from the light and calmed them. The light resolved into what the monks called a Star-Child. The Star-Child told them that this was the fulfillment of the prophecy and to prepare for a journey to meet the Lord in the flesh.

The monks and nuns prepared for the journey to Bethlehem. I looked up how many miles it is from Shanghai, China to Jerusalem, Israel. It is 5000 miles, which is about 75 days or more by foot. The Star-Child led the Magi all the way to Bethlehem, providing an abundance of food along the way.

Let's just stop here for a minute. This is not the first time that we have heard of people who have no experience or knowledge of the Hebrew religion coming to Israel. Kings and queens in the Hebrew Testament are drawn to Jerusalem, knowing little of what was going on there. In the New Testament, Ethiopian princes are intrigued by the story of the Hebrews and learn about Jesus. Dreams, visions, soft whispers in other ways of worship, a sense of 'someplace else' or otherness tugged deep within and pulled people out of their lives and into a new world, a new way of being, a new way home. Is this not what God has done with us? Drawn us out and into a relationship with God's self and with Jesus?

The Magi arrived in Israel and immediately drew the attention of King Herod. Why? Why did Herod care about one more group of people coming into the city? Jerusalem was a trade route city. It was a pass-through point between the East and the West. Visitors from away came through all the time. Wealthy merchants, traveling diplomats, tradesmen, pilgrims, nomads. So, I ask, who draws the attention of kings? Nothing much has changed in the world since Jesus' day, and what was true then is true now. What draws the attention of presidents, kings and queens, and dictators is power. If you don't know the answer to global political and social questions, the most likely answer is *power and control*.

A group of apparently wealthy Magi, led by a Star-Child, from far away, must have radiated some sort of power and drawn the attention of Herod. Herod wanted to know why the Magi have come to Israel and they told Herod of the birth of the Child of God. The story suggests that only the Magi can see the light that the Star-Child radiates, and the Star-Child points the Magi to Bethlehem. Herod asks the Magi to stop by on their way back through Jerusalem and tell him about their experience, not to pay homage, as Herod says, but so that Herod can kill the prophecy in the cradle.

Upon arriving at Mary and Joseph's house, it was as if the Star-Child and the baby Jesus merged, or more likely, the presence of God in the Star-Child and the human form of Jesus were one and the same and were in two places at once. There was celebration and joy. Angels appeared over the house and the light of God shone forth in the coming of God to earth as a human being.

The pillar of light told the Magi to go home another way so as to avoid Herod, and the Magi are led home by a glowing star. Upon their arrival to far Shir, they preached the Gospel to their village and neighbors. They shared the joy of their experience until a good while later, about 35 years later, Thomas - you remember Thomas, the one who touched the Resurrected Jesus? - Thomas came to them, having been told of the Magi by Mary, and baptized the whole area. This dissolved the ancient and holy community of the Magi, who have been holding the secret of the coming of the Christ since Adam.

The bridge from the East to the West has been completed. Those who have seen a great light have come out of darkness and into the light.

Now, I ask you, why aren't we telling this story? Is it any less fantastic than the one about astrologers from Babylon or priests from Persia? This story of the Magi was the better known for a long time in the ancient world. What happens that one story becomes the 'true' story and another one no longer is?

I don't know, but I think that shift of story has something to do with what I said about Herod. Power speaks to power, power seeks out power. Kings are powerful, and if this is a story of three kings, then the bridge being built justifies worldly power in alliance with spiritual power. If this is a story of astrologers or priests, then we are still talking about a kind of power in this world, but with a mystical, magical bent. But if we are talking about people who pray and keep ancient prophecies in far away lands, people like you and I, but committed to an essential possibility that is to happen, well, that is not very worldly or very powerful, is it? For the story of the Magi I told, none of the power is theirs. The world has given them no power. All their power has come from God.

Do the stories we tell justify worldly powers and principalities, or do the stories we tell rely on the spiritual power of God rather than any power or control we can exert in the world? Our president on Friday said, "*God is on our side.*" No. That is not how any of this works. We are on the side of God, and once we are, our concerns are about how the eternal Kingdom of God is working through us, not how God can serve us.

What story will we tell?

The last line of our story in Matthew is “*they went home by another way*”. Do the bridges we build between ourselves and one another create an opportunity to tell others of what we experienced in the light of Christ, or do the bridges we build allow us to align ourselves with worldly power and control?

It is funny, our Visitors From Away, the Magi, understand that the world is a place of waiting, following, finding, and then proclaiming the light of God to the people. This is what our earthly life is all about when we are followers of Jesus. It is not about power and control in any way.

Like the Magi of far Shir, we wait in silence and prayer and hope. We know in that silence and prayer and hope there is a profound prophecy and secret, that God will be with us. When we begin to see the signs of that prophecy and secret coming to pass, we follow those signs closely. We trust that the God to whom we have entrusted our lives will lead us, like a child from the stars. This is what we trust, even in the face of emperors, presidents, authoritarians, preachers, and cult leaders. When we find what has been prophesied and promised and prayed for, we celebrate with joy and allow that experience to completely inform and transform our lives. And then we follow the new way we have been shown, the new light that now shines at once and the same time from the home of Joseph and Mary and from the Cross, to the home we came from, and we take a new pilgrimage, a new way home, so we can proclaim the Good News to others.

This is how the bridge of God gets built. This bridge isn't dependent on what we believed beforehand, what Scriptures we know or don't know, whether we are from nearby or from away. The building of the bridge is completely dependent on the will of God, the same will that entrusted Creation to Adam, that made promises to Noah, that filled the land with the descendants of Abraham, that built a bridge between Jacob and Egypt by way of Jacob's son, Joseph, that created a land bridge for the Israelites led by Moses into the wilderness, and then a path for Joshua and the Israelites into the promised land, that brought forth an earthly king in David and Solomon, and those builders of bridges between the people and their kings, the Prophets. This is the same will of God, the same bridge that connected the Magi, the visitors from away, to the Christ child. And it is the same will of God that has brought us together from many places and many ways of being to this new way of being, this new way home, today.

And that, friends in Christ, is why the Magi are important. Theirs is the story of a bridge between Christ and the rest of the world. A rainbow bridge of vast diversity that is teeming with ideas, thoughts, experiences, and expressions of the light of God. Be like the Magi - wait, listen and pray, then follow the light to the new life and light of God, trusting the Holy Spirit as our guide, and then bring the message home to your people, your tribe. Amen.