

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
Epiphany Sunday – Jan 6, 2008
Matt. 2:1-12

Following the Magi

I am not one who likes the game Trivial Pursuit. It is because I do not do very well when I play. My mind always freezes over and I lose the ability to think clearly. And you know me—I am competitive enough that repeatedly not doing well at something sours my taste for it. But, I am putting aside my distaste for trivia this morning. I want to begin this sermon by playing a bit of Trivial Pursuit. I have a few questions and I want to see if you know the answers. Perhaps your brain will not freeze over.

Our questions are based on our Scripture reading from Matthew – the story of the Wise Men, also known as the Magi (the Greek word for astrologers). First question: *How many wise men are in the story?* Many of us immediately think of 3, don't we. Look at our own nativity scene. We have 3 wise men up there. We know the song "We Three Kings of Orient Are." We have always assumed 3. But we might be mistaken. Matthew never tells us how many magi followed the star. We have three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh, but for all we know, ten magi could have brought three gifts.

Next question: *How did the Magi travel?* I always assumed they traveled by camel. A bored-looking camel always makes an annual appearance at the University Park live nativity scene by the duckponds. But again, we really have no idea. They could have come on camels or donkeys or any other beast of burden. My parents received a Christmas card that pictured them as traveling on horseback.

Last question: *What were their names?* The names we know best are Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar. But, we don't find those names in this text. These names were given them by a Christian monk in the 8th century. Matthew is silent on the subject. They stay anonymous in his story. Game Over.

It is strange, isn't it? We think we know so many details about this story. But when we really pay attention, we notice Matthew has painted these Magi with very wide and generalizing strokes—careful to give us their outlines, but just as careful not to fill in too much of the color and substance. Matthew tells us how the events unfolded. But, he does not tell us much about the magi themselves.

Many scholars think Matthew's vagueness was a very purposeful decision made by the Gospel writer. They claim, and I believe, that Matthew wanted us to use our imaginations and speculate as we read the story—adding details and embellishment from our own time and our own place. For while that imaginative speculation is clearly outside of Matthew's text, it is probably right in line with his aim. Matthew was writing for a Gentile Christian congregation, a people he hoped would see themselves in the Magi and therefore experience the journey for themselves¹.

So let's follow Matthew's line of thinking. Let us assume the Magi were biblically unnamed in order to be named: Shannon, Gil, Stephen, Jennifer, or your name. Let us imagine ourselves in the story and see what we might experience if we fill in the broad outlines of the Magi with our own color and substance. So put your name and face on one of the Magi and let's follow their journey to see what we might learn.

As soon as we step into the story I am struck by how open they are to the search. We are not sure what they were doing before the star appeared. Maybe they were busy trying to work and support a family. Perhaps they were struggling with family members or friends who thrived on causing chaos and discord. Maybe astrology work just wasn't paying what it used to and they were starting to get nervous about how they would continue to make it. Or, perhaps life was grand and things were moving along just as they hoped. We are not quite sure what they were doing before the star appeared on their horizon.

But as that star showed up, it got their attention. And, not only did it get their attention, but they

immediately went on the search to see where it might lead. Now, frankly, this is where the magi named Shannon might have put up a fuss. I can just hear myself asking, “What do you mean we need to pack up and follow that star? We cannot just set off without knowing where we are going or how to get there.”

Maybe you would protest as well. But, perhaps this is one intersection of the Magi’s story and our story where we would be wise to learn from them. For one amazing thing about these Magi, perhaps the thing that made them wise in the first place, is that they were open to the search. They saw the star and knew something big, something holy, had just taken place. And they were immediately open to whatever, whomever might come their way. They were immediately ready to start the search.

Perhaps this is one thing the Magi might teach me, might teach you, might teach this church—openness to the holy and daring search that God initiates every single day of our lives—not just on starry nights. Remember God does not ask us if we are there yet, if we have arrived. God only asks if we are headed in the right direction, if we are willing to embark on the search.

So, let’s learn from the Wise Men and be open. But just as we get behind them again, the Magi do something that shows their lack of wisdom. They go straight to Jerusalem and King Herod. The Magi knew something new had happened. They knew something new was afoot in the world. But, they falsely assumed it was being done within the structure of the old world, the old rules, the old power system. They falsely assumed the changeover of power would be done the way it has always been done—in the palace in Jerusalem.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when they make this move, I find it a lot easier to stick my face on the face of one of the not always-so-wise men. Playing by the old rules is my first tendency too. “What do you think about this new idea Shannon?” “Well, I don’t know. It’s a lot to think about. We’ve never done it that way before.”

And it is not just me. Playing by the old rules has always been the initial tendency of the Church (big C). Our theological motto is “Reformed, always willing to be Reformed,” but truth be told, it takes a big swift kick in our ecclesiological behind to make us really step out and do something new, to change from the old ways, to stop playing by the old rules. It is not that we want to be unfaithful. We just want to be cautious.

I bet the Wise Men felt the same way. They knew a new king had been born. They had the courage to start out on the search. But then they figured they would stop following that star for just a minute and do the logical thing, the thing that was always done, the cautious thing.

And Herod reacts just like we knew he would. He plays the old power card just as one would expect. He is very threatened by the idea of a new king, of a new world, of a new day with a new reign. And we heard last week what happens when Herod, the old powers of the world, are threatened. They seek and destroy everything and everybody in their way.

But Herod tries to play it cool for the Wise Men. After consulting Scripture, he tells them to go on to Bethlehem to see what they might see. But then, Herod declares, after you see the new thing that you say God has done, come on back to the old way of doing things and let me know what you found. In other words, you can go to that manger and you can see this new, amazing, blow-your-mind way that God has decided to enter into our time and history. BUT, as soon as the after-Christmas sales have ended and all the warm, fuzzy holiday feelings have faded, just go back to the way you were, doing the things you’ve always done, being the person you have always been, playing by the old rules, living in the old world, going right back to Herod to tell him all about it.

And at first, the wise men, the ones with our names, plan on doing just that. They follow that star. They see it stop. They go into the house. **But then** they see the child. They come face to face with this child who they know is the new king, who they know is to be the shepherd of Israel, who they know is the Savior of the world. And they are overwhelmed with joy at the discovery. And they cannot help but give everything they brought with them to that child. And they cannot help but give all of themselves to him too.

Is it easy to put your face on their faces at this point of the story? Can you imagine that kind of overwhelming joy that caused them to throw open their lives, their hearts, their souls to this new child-Savior? I have had moments when I have been absolutely overwhelmed by God's decision to be our God in this way—a way that is weak in power in order to be strong in love. I have had moments where I threw open my life, my heart, my soul.

Have you? I bet you have. Probably not every day. Maybe not even every Christmas. But you've felt it. You've had moments of worship and adoration when you could have easily put your face on the Magi's face at the manger. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here this morning. If something, someone, had not grasped you at some level, you would not bother with this whole strange thing we do on Sunday mornings.

But this brings us to the final challenge of this story. The Magi experience an overwhelming joy at God coming to be one with us in this way, in this baby King. But then, they decide to go back home ANOTHER way. They find themselves transformed at this Christmas moment, at this "God birthed into the world" moment, and they decide not to return home the way they came. They decide **not** to go back to the old way of doing things, the old way of being, the old world of old power and old dominance. They decide **not** to go back to Herod's way of threat and fear and domination.

They are transformed at the Christmas moment, at this "God birthed into our world as one of us moment", and they decide **not** to be content with who they've been anymore. They go home ANOTHER WAY. They leave the manger differently than how they arrived.

What about you? If you are still willing to put your face on one of the Wise Men and give him your name, what will it mean for **you** to leave the Christmas moment differently than how you arrived? What does it mean for you to go home another way, for this church to go home another way, for the world to go home another way?

Might it mean that **we** stop operating out of fear and threat? Might it mean that **we** trust that the God who has called us on the search does not mean us harm and can be trusted to lead us into our future? Might it mean that **we** are more open to being vulnerable to the pull of love and justice, to the new things that God might be calling on us to be and to do?

I am not sure just yet what it means for me to go home from the Christmas moment by another way. But I think we are called to wrestle with that question. For if our stories are indeed part of God's story, then we can do no less.

So put your face on your favorite Magi and give him or her your name. And then, then, ask God to help you understand what it means for you to leave the manger this year different than how you arrived. What might that look like in your life this year?

ⁱ Long, Tom. Matthew – Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville: Westminster JKP, 1997, page 16.