

**January 3, 2016 “Why the Wise Men Searched” Matthew 2:1-12**  
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore Rev. Dr. Thomas Blair

Happy New Year! Each New Year we make the journey from the tried and true to something new. Father time keeps on ticking and we can't stop it. All we can do is learn, once more, to be in step with God's Spirit along the way, to be attuned to God's movement in the world with us, guided by the light revealed in Jesus- born once again for us.

Our scripture reading is the traditional passage for this Epiphany Sunday, as familiar a story as there is in the Bible; but as always, with more meaning than meets the eye, or the ear.



Our bulletin cover image provides a hint of the mystery to come. It is a close up of The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Christmas tree and Neapolitan Baroque crèche in New York City. The display has been a seasonal feature since 1957. The brightly lit, 22-foot blue spruce—with 18th-century Neapolitan angels and cherubs hovering among its branches is a seasonal staple in the Museum's Medieval Sculpture Hall.

The display features animals and background pieces that create a dramatic setting for the Nativity, back-dropped with the ruins of a Roman temple; (this is not Bethlehem of Judea!) Whether this was a simple reproduction of 18<sup>th</sup> century Italian art or something more is up for us to decide. I'm not sure who knows exactly what the curators had in mind in 1957. The message this setting delivers us today, with the holy family nestled amidst the fallen Roman columns, is that the humble birth of the Christ child arrives in the midst of a crumbling empire around him. The new is born in the midst of the old, a fitting message for early January.

How well this museum display represents the geopolitical reality of early first century Bethlehem is hard for us to know, but our central characters of today's story, the wise men, would have been in the best position to know. The star they sought was surely a sign of change to come: a King of the Jews was to be born! This was news to them, and even bigger news to Herod- who reigned as a puppet king in Jerusalem. Scripture says that Herod, and 'all Jerusalem with him' were frightened at this news, meaning that before a *new* King would come, a military overthrow would have to replace the old one. Regimes don't change peacefully.

Now, what the Wise Men knew about Herod and the Jews is anyone's guess. The stated intention of their journey was to pay homage to this newborn. No doubt they were drawn in by the star's appearance and in wonder of the God who would cause such a sign. But they found themselves instead immersed in a political situation fraught with intrigue.

Was this baby, whom their astrological readings told them was a king unlike all other kings, a threat to them? Was he one who would change the razor's edge balance of power in the ancient world? They would soon find out.

The Magi arrive at King Herod's court to tell him about this newborn king. Herod may well have been wary of these strange men from the East, but he also knows he can't send his own thugs tromping around Bethlehem without sowing fear and flight, so he directs the Magi to collect information for him. Herod is a megalomaniac, crazed with power, not beyond murdering his own children and, just a few verses after today's reading, ordering the elimination of all the infants of Bethlehem. Herod is the epitome of evil and he conscripts the Wise Men to become his spies.

Could these Wise Men have gotten themselves in over their heads? My guess is that for the first hearers of this story, unlike those of us who have heard it a thousand times, there may well have been ominous background music when the Wise Men finally arrive in Bethlehem. They are overjoyed at finding Jesus, but why? Why are they really here? Who do they really work for? Whose side are they on? When they lift their hands from their traveling chests, will those hands hold gifts or an arrest warrant? (There's more tension present than we know, between the lines.)

The text is sparse on this point. Scripture tells us, "On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts."

No matter the Magi's original intention, no matter their conflicted and questionable allegiances, when they meet Jesus, something happens. It is a scene the wise men didn't and couldn't have expected.

Perhaps it was because of the sheer humility of the conditions in which Jesus was born. Surely no king they ever knew was born in such humble conditions. That the Creator's star pointed to THIS birth above all others, and in such circumstances, must have given them plenty of food for thought, and prayer. The most important line in this story is the final one: "They left for their own country by another road." The Wise Men won't turn in Jesus to the authorities. They won't betray him to his enemies. Even if their original plans required a full reporting, meeting Jesus changes everything. The Wise Men do not return to Herod. They walk a different road, beginning that day and continuing all the days of their lives.\* They choose the side of the child who rests beneath the star. They refuse to comply with the plot to destroy him. They choose Jesus and are forever remembered for that simple act.

Today, we might learn from their act as well. The wise men set a very good example. Whatever draws us to the savior, whether it be a memory, a star, a tug on our hearts, it

is not the journey under the star that is the end game, but the person of Jesus, who is already waiting for us...

And what draws us, each one of us, is of some necessity unknown. It may be a deep yearning or longing, a loss or a love, a sense of duty, a hope, a dream, a quest.

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But there is nothing that draws our lives together so much as the mystery that calls us to this place, that guides our feet and that charts guidance for us along the way. Because somewhere deep, deep inside us we realize that we need to bring our lives in homage to one who is better than we are, more loving than we can be, more gracious than we have been, and whose forgiveness and love reaches so much farther than our forgiveness or love ever can. We come to worship, bringing all we are to God.

It was Barbara Brown Taylor, writing about the mystery of why people come to church who wrote,

*If it is true that God exceeds all our efforts to contain God, then is it too big a stretch to declare that dumbfoundedness, awe, is what all Christians have most in common? And that coming together to confess all that we do not know is at least as sacred an activity as declaring what we think we do know?*<sup>1</sup>

We gather in homage, awe and thanks for the journey we have been blessed to take. This church today, us gathered together, our odd collection of humanity that we are, have been called to seek and follow the light that leads to the one who we meet at this table.

Here on this first Sunday of the New Year, the Sunday of Epiphany, we once again begin to lift the edge of the cover of God's mystery, and celebrate the revealing of God's love for all humankind, saying holy words, taking bread and cup and knowing that in this place and in these acts this is more than bread and more than the cup

This is what it means to gather in this place and to give ourselves over to the God we know and trust in Jesus Christ... trusting Christ with our lives, our souls, our calendars and our wallets, as our Lord and Savior... the king born for the Jews and born for us as well.

We gather because somehow we know that God's love and mercy arrives at this table, and in this place and time we are made a little more whole, we are made a little more one, as we stand at the edge of New Year and reach for the mystery in ways we cannot explain that God is here.

Here at this table, we are met by our Living Lord. What better way is there to begin our journey, together? Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, **Leaving Church**. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006. p. 111.

\* In my study of this passage this week, I found an unexpectedly amusing moment in Raymond Brown's masterly commentary on the Christmas texts, [The Birth of the Messiah](#).

Brown remarks how the piety of the church has worked overtime on this wise men story. Christian imagination has morphed the magi into kings. We have even given them different ethnicities and names. Brown cites a fanciful entry in an ancient saints' log in

which the three wise men, having served as tireless champions of the gospel and now centenarians, meet for one last Christmas reunion in Armenia. After celebrating the Mass of the Nativity, the three magi die within days of one another.

One would expect Brown, the renowned scholar, to come down harshly on such embellishment. Instead, he wryly observes that this coloring in of the story with the crayons of imagination and piety is pretty much exactly what the gospel writer Matthew hoped would happen.