

Just a few days before Christmas I was grocery shopping at Trader Joes. As I entered the store someone came up to me and enthusiastically engaged me in a one- way conversation. “Hi Tom! Long time no-see! How have you been? How are the kids? It’s soooo good to see you!” All the time she was talking, I was trying to remember who in the world this person was; did I know her AT ALL? What was her name?

Was this a scam? What was going on here?

But after a minute or so, as my brain was scrambling to connect all these disjointed dots, her name came back to me and how it was that I knew her!

Jenny was her name, and she used to live next to me until the house next door was demolished by the county two years ago to make room for a park. She had a new hairdo and I hadn’t seen her or talked to her in these past couple of years. But somehow it all came back to me and I was so relieved to finally be able to say, at the end of this very one-sided conversation; “It’s been great to see you, Jenny. Have a very Merry Christmas!” Whew!

This little anecdote is a fitting re-introduction to the story of the Wise Men. We see them infrequently (just once a year), we don’t even really know their names, and making a connection between their lives and ours can be a bit trying, but it is surely worth the effort!

It can be difficult for us to hear the story of the Magi’s visit without picturing nervous children in sequined costumes and large headdresses carrying gifts of *faux* gold, frankincense and myrrh or imagining what Louise has up her sleeve for upbeat Magi costumes for next year’s Christmas pageant.



Beyond the layers of carols, pageants, folklore and costumes, the story of the Magi is an important one to start the new year. Its message is more relevant than we know.

To begin with, you have to wonder why this is in Matthew's account at all. As is often asserted, Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels. He opens the gospel with an account of the 42 generations from Abraham to Jesus. He is detail oriented and doesn't miss a beat, being sure to reference the highlights of the royal line of David. This baby Jesus is clearly born a Jew.

Yet interestingly, the first and only dignitaries who come to praise Jesus and the ones who have the first speaking parts in this story are non-Jews. They are Magi, astrologers! This

unorthodox path from the stars to the Messiah is unique to the story in Matthew and unexpected, given the numerous instances in Hebrew scripture where astral cults are condemned. Yet here are astrologists looking to the stars to locate the Messiah. The Magi ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." (You



still have to wonder why in the first place that Magi, foreigners, are at all interested in the birth of a Jewish king.)

The wise men were perhaps members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, noted for their study of the stars as divine revelation. History has given them names; Melchior (Babylonian), Caspar (Persian) and Balthazar (Arab). Their gifts have symbolic significance in light of the identity of the baby to whom they are given. Gold is a symbol of kingship, frankincense (used for incense) is a symbol of deity, and myrrh (embalming oil) is a symbol of death.

Yet there is an audacity about Matthew's story that gets buried under all the costumes and pageantry.

There's a message right under our noses we've been conditioned **not** to see. The visit of the magi is a moment for recognizing God's presence, available to all. By the light of the star, God is an equal opportunity Savior. (We usually don't hear it that way.)

Mary and Joseph are not "Christian," and the Magi are not beholden to Hebrew law. Yet they are faithful witnesses to God's physical arrival in our world.

Traditionally, the church's response to alternative spirituality has been negative, ranging between feeling threatened by Christianity's loss of assumed authority and a determination to refute such claims with "the truth."

Matthew's story of the Magi gives the church an example to resist those reactions and consider the possibilities that one might come to faith in Christ through a different journey.

It is hard to imagine that Matthew could have included this portion of the story of Jesus without some awareness that God is in fact able to work in and through forms of faith beyond the Hebrew tradition.

While the story of the Magi is familiar, the intended meaning of the story is still partially hidden from us. Because of the "cameo" nature of the Magi's appearance and quick departure, there are (perhaps intentional) gaps of meaning left for us to fill.

The Magi are clearly Gentiles who could not be more remote from the Jews of Palestine in heritage and worldview. Likewise, there is an open question as how to understand their symbolic role.

There is a tradition that noted the parallels between Moses and Jesus: Herod is a pharaoh figure, Jesus is a Moses figure, and the Magi represent the nations that are part of the exodus/exile story.

The plain reading of this story is that the Magi found Jesus by way of a star. With that simple story line, Matthew makes one declaration clearly and leaves other questions



unanswered. The infant Jesus is the one who is born king of the Jews. What is not answered, either in this story or in the next twenty-seven chapters, is whether as a result of finding the Christ the Magi forsook their astrology. (And that may be totally beside the point for Matthew.)

What is not answered is whether astrology is true, whether it has a "point of contact" with the Christian faith, or whether it is simply a historical reference. It's not that the facts don't matter; it's just that they don't matter as much as the story does, and **stories can be true whether they happened or not**. You don't have to be an archaeologist to know if this is true or spend hours in a library combing through ancient texts. There is another way to know the truth. You just listen to the story; go over it again in your mind's eye. You let it speak to the inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your life whether the story is true and what it means for you. You can ask yourself a few questions to know if it is true... does it make you more or less compassionate; does it open you up or shutter your heart; does it increase your capacity for joy or does it wall you off?



Matthew's epiphany story is the first explicit call to share the Good News. It unveils the possibility that there can be ways of meeting Jesus without having to answer the larger questions of ultimate truth or falsity of alternative spiritualities.

Even this "most Jewish" of the Gospels is aware, from its first page onward, that it is not necessary first to have the biblical and Jewish hope before one can approach the Messiah in devotion and praise.

In following the light they are provided, the Magi find the goal of their quest in bowing before the Jewish Messiah. They show that the yearnings even of those who



do not fully know what they seek are met in the arrival of the infant in Bethlehem.

This is a coming together, a convergence moment... a reminder, for all of us, that God is bigger than us alone, and that the invitation to believe comes beckoning from far more sources than we are ever aware.

Once a year we meet these three wise ones as a reminder that God would have us stretch our comfort zones. As we meet them again at this time of the year, how are you invited to see and share the good news of God's arrival in this world (and in your life) with those who approach life differently from you?

Following the light that God gives you, you will find the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.