

Sermon (1/8/17, Matthew 2: 1-12):

If the three Wisemen were Wisewomen, the old joke goes, they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts that Jesus and his family could have actually used.

While that might be true, the story of the Magi is a very interesting one and, if we're honest with ourselves, quite surprising and even challenging both for those who first heard it and for us today.

While visiting with some friends during the Advent season a number of years ago, I noticed the crèche they had set up on one of their living room tables. Like most crèches, it had Mary and Joseph in the center of the scene, lovingly gazing at their newborn. Above them was an angel and to their side were shepherds and a number of sheep. Way off to the side were the Magi still en route, riding their camels.

Someone said this was obviously Matthew's version of the nativity. What gave it away was the location of the Magi, still off in the distance.

While we don't have much to go on when it comes to the birth narrative of Jesus, over the years, we have, in many ways, melded together a somewhat distorted and embellished picture of Jesus' nativity.

One thing the joke does get right is that the Magi were late, if, that is, we are to assume they were supposed to be there at the time of Jesus' birth. Some have suggested that Jesus might have even been as old as 2 years of age when the Magi finally arrived.

In defense of all of us male sorts, one *major* thing the joke gets wrong is that they DID stop for directions – at Herod's palace to be exact. It's also worth mentioning just how risky that stop was which is, perhaps, the reason why we males tend to have a tough time asking for directions still. Somewhere hidden in our DNA there must be a Magi gene reminding us, even sub-consciously, how risky it can be to ask for directions. I bet you've never heard that explanation before!

The fact that the Magi stopped at Herod's palace reveals just how unfamiliar the Magi were about Jerusalem. If they had known anything about Herod, they probably would have opted for a gas station or, perhaps, a camel station instead. They would have known that asking Herod where

to find a new-born King was pretty dangerous stuff. Herod was not one to take kindly to any sort of competition for his throne. Indeed, he was probably already on the defensive as it was.

Somewhere along the way the Magi were raised to the status of King. In Puerto Rico and some other Latin countries, Three Kings day, Epiphany, remains a day of grand celebration inclusive of parades and festivals.

For a long time the Eastern Church celebrated Christmas on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Epiphany. On it they would exchange gifts marking the arrival of the three Kings. The Armenian Church still practices this.

Another assumption we've made is that there were only three Magi. In truth, Matthew doesn't tell us how many there were. We've settled on three because they presented three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Over the years the three have even been given names - Balthasar from Arabia, Melchior from Persia, and Gaspar from India.

Well, what is it that we do know about these Magi and what lessons might we learn from them?

To begin with, it's significant to note the people whom God did personally invited to witness one of the most earth shaping events in history – the birth of Jesus.

First, the shepherds-people often looked down upon by the religious establishment – dirty, unclean, failures at keeping the law.

Followed by that were the Magi. Matthew tells us they were from the East which might mean they were from Persia, or Arabia, or Babylon, or any number of other places. We don't know. What we do know is that they were foreigners and non-Jews. Most likely they knew nothing of the Hebrew prophets or the other writings considered to be Hebrew scripture. It probably took them months to get to Jerusalem and, when they did, Jerusalem had to be a strange and unfamiliar place. It makes you wonder what it was like for them and those who encountered them. Did they taste the new foods of this strange land? Smell the strange scents in the market place? Did people stare at them while these strangely dressed folks wandered through the middle of Jerusalem? Did they look on with alarm? Did they pull their children aside out of fear?

Sound familiar? Fear can be a terrible and all-consuming emotion when we allow it to run rampant unchecked. We seem to have a lot of this going on these days. While it's understandable given the horrific attacks and heartbreaking destruction we've seen far too much of, our faith challenges us to be something better than our fear.

Most likely, the Magi were mystics whose expertise was in astrology and maybe even dream interpretation. Using a language they would understand, God sends them an invitation. In their own language, according to their perspective of the world, God reaches out to them to be God's V.I.P. guests at one of the greatest events the world would ever witness-the birth of God's son.

Risking much, the Magi followed an odd and conspicuous star. They packed up their camels, loaded them heavy with supplies and gifts, and set off on a trip that likely took months. It was a dangerous journey as they crossed many borders, passed through unfamiliar lands, and met up with any number of people whose fear could have done the Magi in, including Herod himself.

Yet, the draw of that star, the only thing they had to go on, was, for reasons unknown to us, very great. They persisted and when they arrived in Jerusalem, their reasonable assumption was that they would find this King in a palace so they stopped at Herod's place to ask for directions. They were fortunate they weren't killed on the spot. Seeing a golden opportunity to finally track down and get rid of this newly born King, however, Herod decided to play it cool hoping the Magi would help him find this threat to his reign.

'Go find this King for me,' Herod tells the Magi, 'And let me know where he is so that I can pay him homage.'

'So that I can pay him homage.' It's a phrase that seems to easily slip from many a tongue but what does it actually mean? What does it mean to worship, to bow down and fully give one's self to the authority and call of this One born in a manger? Is it a phrase of convenience? A catch phrase we use to legitimize our own biases, wants, and personal agendas? Is it just something we've grown accustomed to saying without giving it much thought?

‘So that I can pay him homage.’ We hear similar phrases from so many these days including those vying for offices of leadership but it’s one thing to say them and quite another to take them to heart.

From the very start of Jesus’ life, before Jesus was probably even aware of what was going on, God made a bold a statement about what Jesus’ life and ministry would be.

Shepherds – despised by religious authorities but specially called to come and see.

Magi – mystics with a foreign language and a foreign religion and a foreign perspective who had probably never even heard of Moses or the prophets or the Torah before. Yet, God called them in a language that would have been foreign to those who claimed to know God best.

These are the people whom God called to come close, to see first-hand, to bear witness, to celebrate, to find the greatest gift of hope the world has ever known. Are they not also the same type of people many tend to look upon with suspicion and apprehension these days? Are these distinguishing marks of the Magi also the distinguishing marks we regard as things to be feared? Are we missing out on something important that God is doing because of this fear, just as Herod missed out because of the fear that consumed him?

I know it can be tough to push this fear to the fringes. Believe me I am not above getting it wrong any more than anyone else is. Far too often, I do it myself in this age of fear and, when I do, I despise myself for it. Yet, it’s stories like that of the Magi that continually call me back from the edge, reminding me that from the start, paying homage to this Christ is and always will be a call that is demanding, challenging, and incredibly risky.

What’s also interesting to note are the people who are *not* invited – the religious elite, the experts at scripture like the ones whom Herod called in to help the Magi find Jesus; the powerful like Herod, the ones holding high offices and living in high places. Maybe it’s not because God didn’t want them there but it’s because God knew they wouldn’t come or, at least, wouldn’t come with a heart ready to receive Jesus.

One of the great ironies about this story is that the Magi really did

need the help of the religious experts on Hebrew Scriptures to provide them with directions to find Jesus. Yet it's the Magi who finally go and exhibit the greatest obedience while the scribes and priests remained in Herod's fear laden court.

At every turn, this is a story that stretches us, drives us beyond our comfort zones, and calls us to push against boundaries we wouldn't necessarily think to breach on our own. Who are the Shepherds of our age? Who are the Magi of our time? Who are the scribes and priests in Herod's fear soaked court? In what ways do our own pride and shallow perceptions of God's calling get in the way of our truly paying homage to this King of Kings, this Son of God, this holy child born into poverty?

These are incredibly challenging and maybe even dangerous questions for us to ask these days but, perhaps, they are also the ones we need to contemplate the most so that we don't miss out, like others did, on the true hope that came and is still coming into the world. The true hope that is the one common denominator we all yearn for in these most challenging of days.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

## Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

*People: And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious God, as your spirit has tugged us in ways unexplainable to be here today, we find ourselves challenged by the story of the Magi. It's a story that makes us wonder much about how our own fears have trapped and debilitated us. It's a story that makes us uncomfortable and maybe even a bit defensive.

We thank you, O God, for these tugs upon us. Through them we are reminded of the nature your calling as it pulls us to venture forth into new perceptions and new wonders. They remind us of love's power to overcome fear, even love that turned a manger into an instrument of salvation and our hearts into vessels that can be reshaped and transformed in ways beyond our imagining. Here our prayer, this day, O God, as we seek to be better than we are. Grant us courage like the Magi had to traverse new landscapes. Make us bold in our welcoming of those who might seem out of place. Open our ears and our hearts to those whom we might be quick to reject because we assume we are smarter and wiser. Grant us humility to learn and grow from those we think have little to offer.

We ask this of you, Beloved Savior, as we feel trapped in a world ruled by Herod's fear. A world that is quick to condemn. A world that seeks only confirmation of what our itchy ears want to hear. Be born in us, we pray, so that we might welcome, as you did, those who can open our eyes and teach us much of what it means to pay you homage.

We pray this day, O God, for those who are weak and forgotten, for those who are ill and frail, for those burdened by grief and despair, for those trapped in places of poverty and pain, and for those whose burdens are heavy and whose days feel void of hope. This day, O Lord, we especially ask you to hear these

prayers we now boldly name in our silence or aloud...

We ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

**All:** *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.*