

The Wisdom of Going Home by Another Way

Epiphany Sunday, January 8, 2012

Epiphany was Friday. It marks the end of the twelve days of Christmas. The Western church observes it by recalling the visit of the magi. If I were dictator, I would order Christmas celebrations begin no sooner than Christmas day, and extend at least until Epiphany. In our house, all Epiphany amounts to is the day when we can finally take down the last of the decorations.

The wisemen or kings were more like astrologers. Matthew alone tells us about them and calls them magi, a word best left untranslated. You can see in magi the root for our English word magician. They were ancient scientists, stargazers. They traveled far, these magi. It is more than a thousand miles from their home in Persia to Bethlehem. (Persia is now Iran.) These Persians were the first Gentile foreigners to worship Jesus as messiah. Their visit in Bethlehem was important to Matthew and his gospel because Matthew's audience was Jewish, and Matthew wants them to see that Jesus is the promised messiah who fulfills the law and hopes of Israel. Even non-Jewish, pagan stargazers from far away could see that Jesus was born to be the anointed of God, King of the Jews and King of kings.

Matthew tells us the magi brought gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. That is where we get the idea that there were three of them, but we do not know that. There may have been two or, more likely, dozens in a company of travelers who banded together for the long journey. We have this tidy, legendary picture of a stable in Bethlehem with three wisemen and their three camels, kneeling in adoration alongside the shepherds and their sheep, a cow or two and a donkey, and at least one angel overseeing the tableau. But Matthew has nothing to say about angels or shepherds or mangers and Luke has nothing to say about magi, so putting these things together probably blurs what actually happened. In fact, Matthew says the magi found Jesus and his parents in a house, not a stable, so more than likely the shepherds and angels of Luke never met the magi of Matthew, who may not have arrived in Bethlehem for weeks or months or even years after Jesus' birth.

The magi stargazers logically assumed that the special star they had followed from the east was pointing to Jerusalem, the capital and most important city in the region of Palestine. There they found King Herod and innocently asked him, "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.” Herod did not know what these foreigners were talking about. He was king, and you would think he would know if another king was born in the vicinity, whether two hours or two years ago. Kings are sensitive about the possible existence of other kings. It makes them edgy and irritable. So Herod summoned his advisers and said, “You’re so smart. Why didn’t any of you give me a heads up about this? If you want to keep your heads up on top of your shoulders, you will go check this out and come back with some news I can use here!” So the royal advisers got up and went. They assembled all the best minds and put together a royal Bible study. They combed the scriptures for clues. They sent out spies and gathered focus groups. They polled the peasants and others who might want regime change. When they were done with their research, they returned to Herod with a big surprise. They had found references in the prophet Isaiah to nations rising to the light, but the only thing they could find that hinted at a birthplace for a king was the more obscure prophet Micah. Micah said that, despite what you might expect, the new king would not be born in a royal palace in Jerusalem, but in a peasant village nine miles down the road. One Bethlehem by name.

Visualize King Herod with arms crossed, a scowl on his face, arrows darting from his hard eyes, and steam seeping from his ears and nose. He is slumped on his throne, staring out the palace window overlooking the Mount of Olives, in the direction of little Bethlehem, birthplace after all of his most prominent and powerful predecessor, King David. Down the long marble hall, Herod’s advisers tell the magi, “OK, you go out the main doors here and down all the steps and turn right; then you go six blocks to Market street and turn left; then keep going and head out the south gates of the city and go nine miles. Don’t worry about not seeing any road signs marking the way. Bethlehem doesn’t have any.”

Maybe the magi did not need any more signs. Maybe the star continued to guide them once the sun went down. In any case, they found Bethlehem and the house where Mary and Jesus were. Notice that Joseph is not mentioned, perhaps because he had gone back to work in Nazareth. If the magi arrived a year or two after the birth, Jesus might have been more toddler than infant, curiously pulling these strangers’ robes or handling their gifts rather than lying in a manger. It’s a different picture. But so what? A colleague, William Arnold, makes six observations about Epiphany and what it might mean for us.

First, the magi had been studying. They knew their history. Not just their history either but the history of others. They had not merely stumbled on to this

momentous event signaled in the night sky. They had searched their own past and their own sacred texts and evidently had some familiarity with the traditions of others. They were interfaith scholars. Global students. Through careful study they were ready, prepared, willing and able to recognize the sign in the sky that thousands of others also must have seen but without understanding. It is said that uninformed travelers can visit a thousand places and see one thing; whereas the traveler who has prepared for the journey can go to one place and see a thousand things. The magi were what Tom Bodett calls “people who notice things.” They notice because they are informed observers.

Second, though the magi were scholars, they did not leave their noses in a book. You know how some really bright people don’t seem to have a clue. The magi were keen observers of the world around them. Ancient prophecies require a contemporary point of reference. Good preachers don’t just know the Bible. They know their congregations, too. Christians must be people with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other, as Karl Barth put it half a century ago. Truth is found in the timeless classics of old and in the timely news of the moment. God has spoken and is still speaking.

Third, the magi were willing and prepared to seek confirmation of what they had learned and seen. They were not lazy. They were diligent in the pursuit of truth. They got up and moved out of Persia and headed to Judea. Their curiosity extended even beyond observation and distance learning from the celestial sign, to going after it. They had to get up and go see for themselves. They had to follow the star. These pre-scientific scholars, like astronomers today, are not satisfied with just looking at the stars from the earth; they want to send up probes to the moon, planets and stars, to get into the marvels of the galaxy as directly as they possibly can. They don’t just want to observe the moon, or Mars or the rings of Saturn. They want to go there. That’s what explorers do.

Fourth, the magi were willing to ask for directions along the way. You know the old joke that if the wisemen were women, they would have brought casseroles and a change of diapers instead of frankincense and myrrh. They must have asked for directions, though, which as you may have heard is also the reason that NASA now includes women in space exploration. The men will never admit they don’t know where they are. Even though King Herod wasn’t the best source of information, the magi can be forgiven for expecting that he would know where the next king was born. The magi demonstrate yet another form of openness to learning: they admit they don’t know it all.

Fifth, once the magi found what they were looking for, they responded with all the gratitude they could muster. Even though they may have doubted that this unlikely child was the promised messiah on ancient prophecy, they nevertheless worshiped him with their extravagant gifts. Just as it seems odd that only a few shepherds knew what was happening at Jesus' birth, so it seems odd that only the magi from far away noticed the star and came to worship the newborn king. Was everyone else asleep? Carousing? Blind and deaf? The important and memorable thing here is that someone noticed and came and worshiped, even though it was not what you might expect. Epiphany admonishes insiders to be humble. Sometimes it's the outsiders who get it.

Sixth and finally, the magi remained open and attentive to the learning new things. Even though they arrived and found what they came for, they continued to seek to learn more and to pay attention to the signs around them. Matthew says they were warned in a dream to avoid going back to Herod with the report he has asked for. They by-passed Jerusalem. Here is one of the most important verses of scripture in the whole drama of Christmas: "They left [Bethlehem] for their own country by another road." The dream tipped them off that Herod was "the powers that were" and not "the powers that be." The magi followed the dream as they had followed the star, and they were changed people. They could not return by the same road. All their lives would be traveling new roads.

Once any of us has worship Christ, the newborn king, we cannot leave unchanged either. We cannot stay in Bethlehem for ever, just as the holy family could not stay there. We have to go back to Nazareth, and we may have to detour through Egypt, depending on what comes. We have to go back home. Life has to return to normal after the excitement of Christmas. But we go back as different people, having learned and worshiped in a new way, and the road back home will be a different one.

*Arise, your light is come, we sing. The Spirit's call obey.
glory of your God which shines on you today.*

Show forth the

We are given some guidance here for the new year: study the ancient texts; keep a hawk eye on what's going on around us; get up and go see for ourselves; ask for directions; worship with extravagant generosity; remain open for messages from the God who is still speaking to us and to all the world.

Arise, your light is come. The Spirit's call obey. (~hymn text from Ruth Duck)