

“Wise Men at the Door”  
Isaiah 60: 1 – 6      Matthew 2: 1 – 12  
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The Wise Men from the East carrying gifts to the Christ Child have become a delightful fixture in the Christmas and Post-Christmas Season. But, of course, things are never as simple as they seem on the surface. Unfortunately, much of the picture we carry in our minds about who they were: for example, what they looked like, what they rode, how many of them there were, and even, believe it or not, their gender is only speculation that has no basis in the Bible. All we have are these few words in the second chapter of Matthew that we read earlier. The word we translate as “wise men” is “magi”. Biblical scholars suppose that these visitors from the East are Persian priests/magicians/astrologers, but even there we cannot know for sure. Our favorite translation for the word, “Wise Men” leads us to assume that they were, in fact, wise, whether they were or not. People also assume that they might have been kings who rode in on camels, and because they brought three gifts, perhaps there were three of them. I might add that only the Gospel of Matthew contains this story and that Mark, Luke, and John make no reference to it at all. All of the birth stories (found only in Matthew and Luke, by the way) have strong similarities to the miraculous birth stories about other famous and powerful men who were also known as “Sons of God”. This fact leads us to look for truth in these stories, not so much in their historical accuracy as in their meaning. I have come to believe that the search for meaning is well worth it.

Even with all these concerns about what the Bible actually says and about the “facts” of what actually happened, the story is still compelling and has come to occupy an important place in our understanding of Christ coming into the world. So, finding that once again this year they seem to be knocking at the door of our holiday celebration, we might as well see if they can teach us something without our concerning ourselves too much with the historical details.

While we could look at a number of different elements of the story, for the sake of this sermon, I am most curious about what their proverbial wisdom signifies. Some of the meaning has to do with their identity as “Magi”. Clearly they were learned ones who looked to the movement of the stars for meaning. They probably were astrologers. While astrology is still known to us in the present, most people consider it to be little more than a parlor game. At the time of Jesus, however, what happened in the stars was thought to be a reflection of life on Earth, and vice-versa. To be an astrologer was to have a noble and useful profession. The Magi in Persia were known to be astrologers and interpreters of dreams. So, we can imagine them looking to the stars from their home “in the East” as the story says. They discovered this star to the West of them and discerned that some significant event must be taking place somewhere in that direction. Stars and comets were often associated with the birth and death of great rulers. In Roman history, we find that after Julius Caesar was murdered, his adopted son, Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus) pointed to a comet as the sign that Julius Caesar was assuming his rightful place with the Gods in the Heavens.

However the Magi figured it out, we can conclude that they gathered together some gifts and set out to discover the new king whose entry into the world was heralded by this star. It may be that they have brought more gifts than just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh identified in the Scriptures. They also brought their wisdom.

As we read the account in Matthew, we see right away that while they may be wise, they are not always smart. Their choice to consult with King Herod was not the most enlightened choice that

they could have made. Of course, the king was interested in finding this “New king”, but being a petty and grasping ruler, his only motivation was to eliminate anyone who promised to shake up his hold on power. At first, the magi took Herod at his word, that he also wanted to worship this new king, but it didn’t take them long at all to figure out that Herod was no worshipper of Jesus.

Before we get down on Herod too much (easy as that would be to do), let’s look at a small detail that readers of the story often ignore. “When Herod the King heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” It’s easy to see why Herod would be troubled because any “new king” would be a rival to him. But why would Jerusalem be troubled along with Herod. The obvious answer is that the people knew what a tyrant Herod could be and that he would be likely to overreact to this news, creating suffering for many. What is less obvious is that all humans, including those in Jerusalem, carry a strong, though often subtle, distrust of change. Even positive changes can make us nervous. Even though we live in a land of plenty, there is a pervasive fear that if things change we will lose what we have. Perhaps you’ve heard the saying: “The devil we know is preferable to the devil we don’t know.”

So, in a sense, the wisdom that the Magi bring to Jerusalem and to us potentially threatens our comfortable way of doing things. While this is a normal human reaction, it often causes us to reject the very changes that could make life so much richer for us, and those around us as well. People tend to see messiahs as changing externally oppressive structures from which they will be “saved”. People also know that it is not possible to follow any messiah without being changed by the experience. At the very least, messiahs require a response. And something in us changes whenever we respond.

The wisdom brought by the Magi is transmitted as much by the mere fact of their journey as by their knowledge of the stars. It was not enough for them to stay in their comfortable surroundings while making learned pronouncements about stars and kings. They moved. They packed up and left their predictable surroundings to go on a journey. They could not have known what they would find, and they could not know how the journey would change them. Still, they went.

In the United Church of Christ, we make as a statement of our faith that “God is Still Speaking”. If, in fact, God is still speaking to us, then perhaps also the messiah is continuing to be born into our lives in ever more transforming ways.

The Magi have come to us. They have imparted their knowledge that something significant is happening. Now, we must look to our own reactions to this news. Perhaps we will refuse to open the door. Perhaps we will take in the information superficially, like we take in so much of the news that comes to us from the television. Perhaps we won’t let it far enough into our being to be changed by it. Or perhaps we will recognize that we, too, are called to make some response to what we have heard. Will we choose to pay attention to these signs, or will we close ourselves off to their effects? This is not an academic question. It asks us to consider being open to the power of the Messiah to transform us both as individuals and as a church. It invites us to embark on a journey, to follow the metaphorical star, without knowing where we are going or what we will encounter. It requires us to have a particular quality of faith as well.

Too often we define faith as the willingness to give intellectual assent to some Biblical statement. The Magi could have given intellectual assent to the presence of the star without ever leaving Persia! But, like them, we are called to have the faith that causes us to embark on an unpredictable journey, one that opens us up to a different kind of world order: one that changes us from within rather than simply imposing behavioral demands on us from without. This is a

big question. We will answer it either by staying the same or by embarking on the journey of transformation.

The Magi teach us something else, too. They do not set out empty handed. They bring gifts. These gifts are more than signs of honor to be laid at the feet of the king. They knew that sooner or later they would have to release what they most valued. All journeys of transformation are like that. We bring with us what we most value, perhaps hoping that someone will convince us that what we already have is good and sufficient. Transformation, however, requires us to release what we value so we create room to receive what we really need.

We have much that is good. We have our community, our building, our rituals, our beliefs, and our forms. We also have our prejudices, our fears, and our addictions to stuff and power. We will bring everything, all that we are and all that we have, with us on the journey.

The question before us as we enter this New Year is this: Will we be prepared to lay it all down at the feet of the Messiah so we can then receive the gift of new life that the Messiah offers to us?