

To Discover How to Be Human Now

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Eagle River, Wisconsin

January 6, 2019

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Text Matthew 2:1-12

Today is the Epiphany Sunday, in a fortuitous year when Epiphany actually falls on a Sunday. Unlike the rest of the world, which extends what we call “the Christmas season” back all the way to Halloween, and then goes cold turkey the day after Christmas, the church lingers over Christmas *after* the event. In our church we’ve continued to sing Christmas carols even after the stores have ceased to play them as buying frenzy mood music. And, in church, today, almost two weeks after Christmas Day, we’re not quite done with the Christmas story itself. Today we have heard again the account of the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem following that famous star, their encounter with the malicious Herod, their adoration of the Christ child, and the warning they received to return home “by a different road.” If we had read on in Matthew, we would have learned again of Herod’s fearful rage that led to the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem after Mary, Joseph and the baby had fled to Egypt. There is yet much to ponder in this Christmas story, and the church is understandably reluctant to let it go without further reflection.

And so let’s begin with the Magi. We often call these Magi, or “Wise Men,” the “Three Kings.” But in fact if they weren’t kings; they were astrologers and priests. They were the scientists of the day, and so their quest for the Christ child represented a coming together of two impulses that in modern times are often consid-

ered to be adversaries of each other—science and faith. The Magi believed that one could discern truth through the study and observation of the stars, and then they had the courage to test both their scientific observations and their faith in those observations by undertaking the long journey from somewhere in the East, possibly Babylon or Persia, to little Bethlehem. The tradition that they were “kings” doesn’t come from Matthew. It comes from the prophecy of Isaiah. “Nations shall come to your light,” Isaiah says, “and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

Even though we put these Magi in our manger scenes along with the shepherds and their animals, Matthew makes no mention of a stable or a manger—he says that the wise men entered the *house* where Mary, Joseph and the child were. And Luke makes no mention of wise men or a star. So the early church actually treated these two accounts of the birth of Jesus, accounts that we put together in our crèche scenes, as two separate events, which is why we celebrate Epiphany, the revelation of Christ “to the nations,” represented by the Gentile magi, twelve days after we celebrate Jesus’ birth. And it’s why we’ve been able to keep on celebrating Jesus’ birth well after our official Christmas Day.

These wise men, these astrologers, these scientist-priests, followed a star. W.H. Auden described the hardships of the journey and its uncertainties in his oratorio, “For the Time Being,”

The weather has been awful,
The countryside is dreary. . . .
At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, and our dogs,
But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.

To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star.

Following the star is an image not of blind faith but of visionary faith. The wise men set out with the sure conviction that the journey was worth it, even if they weren't sure what they would find at its end. They had a vision. And following the star is an image not only of the search for Jesus, but also our search for our very own selves: "to discover how to be human now," is the way Auden puts it. When we, having been tested by the journey, have found ourselves, we will also have found Emmanuel, God with us, God within us. The wise men may have traveled over the rough terrain of the Middle East, but during our own pilgrimage to Bethlehem, we must slog through the rough terrain of our own souls. It is to be a pilgrimage of personal search and of startling revelation. We traverse those difficult areas of our lives that we would prefer to ignore, that we'd like to glide over as a skater glides over a frozen pond. Following the star is hard work. It's trekking through the deserts of our lives toward a destination that promises only God's surprise. Such a journey requires the wedding of mind and heart; of reason and faith. Taking the leap of faith is both exhilarating and frightening. As William Sloane Coffin put it, "First you jump, and then you grow wings."

Before the wise men found Jesus in that least likely of places, little Bethlehem, they asked for directions. (Since they were men, this is maybe the most unbelievable part of the story.) But they asked directions of the wrong person, just as we sometimes go to the wrong places for guidance in our lives, from the latest guru or pseudo-authority, or from people who are seemingly successful, who seem to have it all together but who, deep down, are very shallow. The wise men may have asked Herod where to find Jesus, but they finally found him by listening to their visionary faith, by following that star.

It's fascinating, isn't it, that they went to Herod, who considered himself to be the King of the Jews, to find "the King of the Jews." It was logical, after all. You go to a royal court to find a king. But in that royal court they were to find only a pathetic tyrant. It was in humble Bethlehem that they found Jesus, and bowed down and worshiped an entirely different kind of king. It was in Bethlehem that they discovered, in a vision and a message from an angel, that the kings of this world are almost inevitably at odds with the Jesus who is the Prince of Peace. Herod, true to form, did his level best to do away with this Prince of Peace—he slaughtered countless children in the process—but somehow, the helpless baby, the very symbol of human vulnerability, survived through God's grace. Now Herod is a symbol, a symbol of the evil of loveless power; but Jesus is a reality, the very incarnation of powerless love. "Love hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things," St. Paul tells us. When they offered him their gifts, the wise men acknowledged the power of this love.

So here we are now, beginning the season of Epiphany, the season of the revelation and of sharing the good news of that revelation. We have celebrated the birth of the Prince of Peace and of love incarnate; we have bowed before the manger with the shepherds; and now we, like the wise men, have to return home. The question is whether we are willing to return home "by another way."

Several years ago, I was given some insight into a possible interpretation of this suggestive phrase, "by another way," or "by another road." I was visiting a monastery of the Syrian Orthodox Church in southeastern Turkey. In their practices and in their language, these Christians are probably the most direct contemporary descendants of the early church. In both their daily life and in their church liturgy they use Syriac, or Aramaic, which was the language of Jesus. When they pray, they prostrate themselves in much the same way that Muslims do; in fact, some scholars believe that Islamic prayer was influenced by the older Syrian Orthodox

Christian prayer practices. Today, this small community lives on the firing line between the Turkish Army and Kurdish groups that are in rebellion against Turkey. They are a tiny and endangered minority, and they may well disappear from the birthplace of their church because of war and their consequent emigration to the West.

One day I took a field trip with Bishop Akdemir, who was the abbot of a fourth-century Syrian Orthodox monastery located in this remote and dangerous part of southeast Turkey, only a few miles from the Syrian and Iraqi borders. He wanted to take me to a village with the literally funny name of Hah, H-A-H, a village that had, as he put it, “a very old church,” even older than his fourth-century monastery. It was spring, and the thaw had set in, and I remember our wheezing along in a four-wheel-drive Jeep on what seemed like a never-ending rutted and muddy road. Several times I had to get out and help to push the vehicle. Since all of this was happening in the midst of an active war zone, I kept wondering to myself whether this pilgrimage was really going to be worth it. Already I felt that I had something in common with Auden’s wise men—“the journey is much too long, we want our dinners, and miss our wives, our books and our dogs.”

When we finally got to the village, there, indeed, was the church, and yes, it looked very old. When I asked the local priest how old, he said, “First century.” When he saw my look of surprise and incredulity, he explained that local legend, which he believed, had it that this church had been built by the wise men as they were returning home from Bethlehem.

Now, taken at face value and in the light of archaeology, I had every reason to question this assertion. When I looked the church up in a reference book, the archaeologist author seemed rather certain that it had been built perhaps in the third century, which may still make it the oldest standing church in the world, but the

man who wrote the article scoffed at the idea that it could have been built earlier than that. But the more I thought about the priest's claim the more I was reminded that while statements of faith may not be factually verifiable, or even factually true, they can be true at a deeper level. It seemed to me that this was a faith statement about returning home another way. It reflects the belief that the wise men indeed had been transformed by their encounter with the Christ child and they had to do something about it. They built a church. Do I believe this story to be factually true? Not really. But is it an instructive and moving expression of faith that conveys truth in a more profound and meaningful way than the repetition of dry facts? Yes. For sure.

In this season of Christmastide and Epiphany, having made our journey to Bethlehem, we are asked to return home another way. Auden put these words into the mouths of the wise men,

We returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.

To encounter the Christ child, and then to return home by another way, should make us ill at ease here at home in a society that continues to clutch at its false gods of affluence and immediate gratification. Once we have seen the child, once we have worshiped him, we should never be the same. "To discover how to be human now," to be a child of God, is the reason we have followed the star. And now, having encountered Jesus, it's time to go home, another way. Amen.

