

Unable to go back the way we came!

Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matt 2:1-12
Responsive Reading: Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

There can be few passages of the Bible that have become as misrepresented as this one has throughout history. Not misrepresented in a bad way - but the story has become so mythologized, with non scriptural additions, that it is hard to sometimes focus in on what the story says rather than what we think it says.

The picture that many of us have of this story is so different from the real thing. We sing the carol, "We three kings of Orient are," but they weren't kings – they were astrologers. Down through the years tradition has greatly embellished their personalities. Most probably were astrologers, star gazers who scanned the heavens, not so much to map the universe as to chart the course of people's lives. They were likely priests of Zoroastrianism and the earlier religions of the western Iranians.

You might know the names these magi have been given - Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But there's no mention of that in the original story. And the story gets embellished even further. Melchior is represented in pictures and paintings as an old man, grey haired with a long beard and he brings the gold. Caspar is young and hasn't yet got a beard and he carries the frankincense. Balthasar is represented as having African origins with a newly grown beard on him and he brings the myrrh.

But nowhere does scripture mention there were three. We pick up the idea of three because they offered three gifts. And over the years, much has been made of the gifts they gave – *gold* to crown a king, *frankincense* to perfume the sacrifice of a priest, and *myrrh* to embalm the body of a dead person. Interesting. And great symbolism. However, none of this is actually said in the scripture as we have received it. The three gifts are mentioned only once in Matthew 2:11, and never again and no where else.

Despite all this, there are things we can learn from this story. So let's study it to help us not romanticize it and to learn from it.

In this event, Matthew introduces us to three kinds of people. Each responded to the news about the messianic birth in different ways. Each response reveals the kind of person they were. It's like Matthew is warning his readers that this story calls for a response from us.

Herod's response was that of an insecure tyrant and a murderous leader. He perceived Jesus' birth as a threat. He attempted to kill the child and when he failed he destroyed all the boys in Bethlehem. Herod was very close to the truth of who Jesus really was, but he missed Jesus' real threat, because his carnal selfish mindset stood in between him and the Messiah.

Herod ruled Palestine for nearly forty years and he wasn't called Herod the Great for nothing. He was the only ruler in Palestine ever to have kept peace and stability in that region. He was a brilliant architect and builder; a man of great vision. Not only that – but he could be very generous too. In difficult times, he had been known to stop taxing people in order to give them a chance to survive. And during one particular tough famine, he even melted some of his own gold to buy corn for the starving people. But that didn't save him for one deep character flaw. He could be suspicious and did not tolerate other rivals of his power. He was paranoid about people plotting against him.

The second kind of people was the **scribes**, the religious experts. The scribes were **apathetic**. The fact that Bethlehem was only 6 miles away from Jerusalem and none of them paid a visit confirms this. The shepherds went to check out the baby. The wise men did also. The scribes were a group formed of Pharisees and Sadducees. They were interpreters of scripture, but they seemed to not even be on the lookout for the fulfillment of the prophesy that they knew about. They were not looking for the Messiah – much less someone as strange as the Advent prophesies and events around Jesus.

Consequently, we learn that the most religious and passionate person is often not the one with the most knowledge of Scripture. Instead we learn that the one who is curious, who is open to God doing something new, in new ways, plus has learned to live as our Creator calls us, is who is following and is faithful.

And then of course, **we have the magi**. Unlike Herod and the scribes who had access to scripture, the Magi responded to the sign with their hearts wide open. Although they may have been the most intelligent people of the day, and possibly the most educated, they did not hesitate to acknowledge Jesus' superiority. They clearly prepared to meet Jesus and when they did, they bowed and worshipped him. These foreigners went to Jesus with open hearts and heads and attitudes, in contrast to Herod and the religious leaders.

Matthew at the beginning of his gospel, was saying in a symbolic yet literal way, there is only one right response we have to God's Immanuel. Having power and wealth doesn't automatically get us into the right frame of mind. Having religious knowledge and carrying out right living, doesn't automatically help us understand the Almighty's actions. But the open curious, seeking minds of the magi are what we need to have. Our Creator just might be doing some new thing on our behalf. Unless we position ourselves with eyes to see, ears to hear, we just might miss God's gift to us.

Herod's response was anger and rejection and violence and self protection. He saw but was self defensive. Today it is not so unusual for the mention of the name 'Jesus' to make people angry. Perhaps you have mentioned Jesus in a conversation and been taken aback by the over-reaction of hostility you then faced. And, often, that hostility and anger stems from a bad experience of church or Christians in the past, which then gets projected onto their view of Jesus and even you.

And for us, also, maybe there have been occasions in our own lives when we have felt angry at Jesus. Perhaps when events in our lives

have taken a turn for the worst. Or someone we love has become seriously ill or died. The pain in our lives has been so intense that we have doubted our experience of God and have rejected the very idea of faith in him.

It's tough to have hope and belief when life experiences challenge us to our limits.

And for the **scribes**, the religious leaders, what is so sad is – they just have theory. They saw but then yawned. You would expect to read of them all hurrying off to Bethlehem themselves to greet the Messiah they had been waiting for. But no. There's nothing of the sort. They give Herod the answer he needed and then they went back to their own lives, untroubled and unconcerned with the news they've received.

How many people do we know who know the facts about Jesus in their heads but don't recognize him as King in their hearts, minds attitudes and actions? How often do we know in our heads what God wants from us but we become apathetic in delivering the goods and refuse to sit under his Lordship over us?

Apathy and being unprepared to make a commitment to God is a very real spiritual condition. At the beginning of a New Year, it is always a good opportunity for us to look back and reflect on that which has gone before and look forward to how we can be more committed & passionate in faith for the future.

Then we come to the **responses of the magi**. This is a beautiful parable of the journey of faith that we all go through as we move into a deeper experience of God as followers of Jesus. They saw, acted, believed and worshipped.

The story of the visitors from the East is a four-stage journey: from the head to the heart. **First**, they studied the facts. Their journey of faith begins with them asking questions. They are astrologers – they study the stars - and when they saw a strange star in the sky, they asked themselves questions about it. It's important to notice that the Almighty reaches out to them, in their "star language" so to speak.

Second, they know that the only way to get an answer is to set out on a journey. But that journey involves risk, travel into a strange land, courage, time and money. They had to go to the court of a king, who had a bad reputation of wanting to stay in power. They risked their lives to find out about Jesus. But their desire for truth was stronger than their fears and the obstacles of geography and possibly another language.

Third, when they entered into the presence of Jesus - they bowed and worshipped. Part of their worship was to offer him gifts: theirs is a sacrificial worship that is prepared to give as well as to receive. This call from a star was an important enough sign that they put together expensive gifts – for a foreign stranger! Even someone who had no status or power or wealth, who could never give back as the world evaluates giving.

And then **fourth**, they made their way back home; back to their everyday lives, not leaving Jesus behind, but taking the experience of their encounter with them. There's that lovely touch in verse 12 which says that they went back by another road, inspired by God in a dream. They listened to their Creator a second time!

It's true for all of us that once we meet with Jesus, we do take another road, even if we don't follow him. Life can't ever be the same again. It's true also, that when our lives come under the guidance of the Creator, we grow totally different perspectives about God, others, ourselves and life.

So in the response of the Eastern visitors to Jesus, we see our very own journey of faith. Starting with questions in the mind. Setting out on a journey, which will inevitably involve risk and vulnerability. But a journey that leads us to the Christ-child, where we give him all that we have to offer. And then God sends us out, inspiring us and guiding us the way to go; a new journey with the experience of Christ in our hearts. The way of worship and adoration; the way God chooses for us.

Advent is an outrageous act of God. It has symbolism that only faith can accept. It announces bold undreamable proclamations. It warns us the Almighty God is at work in this world. It offers us another wonderful picture of an unusual God – who reaches out to you and me to rescue us, to love us, and to teach us how to live. We know more today than the magi did, because we see most of the picture, year after year, but also much of Advent is a mystery. Our Creator offers us enough for us to marvel, believe, and then follow that baby. We are invited to see, to journey, to worship and then believe and follow.

In this remarkable story, stripped of the tinsel and the imaginary names and the made up characters, we find the most basic of Christian truths. Every one of us is confronted with the Christ-child this morning and we need to make a response. Will we be like King Herod and reject Jesus? Will we be like the chief priests and teachers of the law and remain lost in apathy and self absorbed? Or will we be like the visitors from the East and step out on a journey of faith?

It a difficult journey, not without questions and doubts, not without personal difficulties, not without sacrificial actions - but a journey that leads to Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Saviour. It's a journey that takes us on a new road; a new direction under God's guidance and within his grace and love and compassion. But it's a journey of life on the highway of holiness.

Advent invites us to walk on the highway of holiness, of a God who picks country peasants to bare his child. Who announces his Son to lowly shepherds and to aliens – people who are from a strange country and even a different religious perspective. And Advent is capped off with the story of Jesus' presentation at the Temple – to two elderly people. The Almighty Creator is really making the point – salvation is for everyone in the whole wide world! The wealthy and powerful are invited, but they need to beware – God loves them but they need to use their influence for justice and peace. Advent does not allow us to go back the way we came.