

Leaving on Another Road
First Christian Church, Manhattan, Kansas
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Matthew 2:1-12

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We assign a number to them, but we're not sure how many there really were. We bestow upon them positions they probably didn't have. We give them names, but only on the basis of tradition. We place them in the story where they don't belong. We're ready to pack the whole story away for another year just about the time they come on the scene.

They are, of course, the wise men. We know they were men, for as someone wrote, had they been women, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts.

We talk of three wise men only because the number of gifts may imply three individuals. Some early traditions indicate that there were 12 wise men.

We sing "We Three Kings" but scripture doesn't use the king title. Matthew refers to the visitors as magi. The word itself had several distinct uses. In the Book of Acts it means magician, and this seems to be its predominant meaning in later Christian literature. It could also designate the magicians, a Persian priestly caste, possible Zoroastrian.

The scholarly consensus seems to favor a third meaning, in this context – astrologers. The practice of astrology was popularly derived from "the east". Since the visit of the magi is prompted by their observation of the stars, this seems to be the probable meaning.

As far as names go, the text is silent. According to tradition that can be traced to the 8th century, the magi were Melchior – king of Persia; Gaspar, king of India; and Balthasar, king of Arabia. Later tradition would identify them as descendants of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the progenitors of the three races of humankind – a European, an African, and a Semite. I discovered that there is one tradition which holds that the gifts the magi gave came originally from Adam. Several early Christian writings indicate that the presents given to the infant Jesus by the magi had been brought by Adam from the Garden of Eden. Noah subsequently took them aboard the ark, then concealed them after the flood, and the magi later uncovered them.

Still another tradition maintains that in later years the wise men were baptized by Thomas the apostle, that all three became bishops and spent the rest of their lives spreading Christianity, and at the end of their lives they each saw the star of Bethlehem once again and were reunited. One legend says that they were over 100 years old when they met to celebrate Christmas, then died within a few days of each other.

Their purported remains were brought to Constantinople by emperor Constantine's mother and later moved to Milan. In the 12th century, they fell into the hands of Roman emperor Barbarossa, who gave them to the archbishop of Cologne, Germany. The archbishop built a cathedral for the relics in Cologne, where they remain to this day.

For many of us, the Christmas season is over. Some of us have already taken down our decorations, packed away the ornaments and stored them in their special place under the basement stairs. The wise men find themselves put into our nativity sets, and then are packed away before their big day – January 6, Epiphany – arrives.

Now in Spain, the place of wise men is a different story. The children eagerly await the arrival of the 3 wise men, who come in through the windows house by house, giving out presents in just one night. The children have written letters to the magi, saying which presents they'd like to receive. The letters are either given to the wise men personally when they arrive on January 5, or to the royal postal people found in center of the towns, a few days before.

The wise men arrive with a traditional parade, and then that night the children put water and bread in the windowsill for the camels to eat and drink while the wise men come in through the windows and leave presents in their shoes.

What's to be made of the coming of the magi? What should our focus be this morning? There's really a number of directions we could go.

We could spend some time talking about the magi's search for the holy and explore ways in which we experience the holy today. Where are our holy places? Where are the places we go to find evidence of the divine?

It might be worthwhile to look at the gifts brought by the wise men. Those gifts have been given spiritual meanings, representing what we ourselves can bring to Christmas. Gold suggests our worldly substances, even our personal and national budgets, need to be dedicated to Christ. Frankincense – our inner most thoughts. Myrrh – since myrrh was used to prepare bodies for burial, there is the implication that this gift ties together the birth and death of Jesus. Also it can stand for our sorrow and suffering.

If God can use our money, if God can use our innermost thoughts, how much more can God do our suffering and sorrow? That could be the focus of the sermon.

And then there's the reaction of King Herod that's certainly deserving of our attention. Herod heard about the birth of Jesus. He was intimidated and pretended to want to worship the Christ child, yet ordered a house to house search, with mother's clutching babies behind closed doors – sshh!

It is a painful fact that the Gospel has enemies. The best way to stir up evil and hatred, after all, is to announce that we are to love everybody. The gospel has enemies – we've seen it in reaction to witness of Martin Luther King and Archbishop Romero of El Salvador.

The way to strengthen and increase the network of lies and deception in the world is to simply tell the truth – that's all it takes. The good news of Jesus Christ has enemies – beginning with Herod. Maybe we should give thought to whether the Gospel has enemies today.

Those are all roads we could travel down this morning. Yet as deserving of our attention as those dimensions are, I was intrigued by the very end of the story.

Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the wise men left by another road. Something happened to the magi on that journey. Something happened to cause them to decide to ignore Herod's command to return to him. I think there was something prior to the dream that helped them decide to heed that warning. They left by another road. They were different people. They were changed people for having bowed in the presence of that little child born in Bethlehem. Even as an infant, Christ made a difference in their lives. They saw life differently.

During last month you probably had an encounter with some manifestation of Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge – the man who had ice water running through his veins – his disregard for his employees, his disdain for the poor, his lack of tenderness and depth of feeling for anyone or anything except money - he's an impossible case. But then an encounter with three spirits, an altered life, a proclamation that he will have Christmas in his heart: "I will live in the past, present and future. The spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach."

Dickens write that some people laughed to see the alteration in Scrooge, but he knew how to keep Christmas well. An altered life, a change in perspective, a different road.

What about you and me? Are we different?

Let me ask the question this way: Did we waste our time in Advent if we're not different at Christmas?

What difference did Christmas make in your life? What difference does Christ make in your life? It is an unfortunate truth that most people would rather enshrine Christ than follow him. What do we do?

A farmer was quoted after his conversion: "Even my chickens know I'm different." Could that be said of us? Having encountered Christ, having experienced the waters of baptism, do we travel a different road? Would our children know we're different? Do our pets? Do our family members? Do our co-workers?

When I read or watch "A Christmas Carol" I'm convinced that change is possible. Scrooge is different. Dickens makes a believer out of me every time. And that's just fiction. We're dealing with Gospel.

Let us pray

By a star, O God, you led the magi to the place of wonder and you lead us by the light of your grace. Lord, when we are blind to that light, forgive us. When, like Herod, we are too fearful to welcome that light, forgive us. When we take that light for granted, forgive us. Renew us in the joy of Christ, and help us live as forgiven, redeemed, grace-filled people that others may see that we are indeed different because we are followers of the Christ. Amen.

Thanks to Fred Craddock and the late Bill Coffin for insights regarding this text.