

'Tis Folly to Be Wise
Rev. Michael D. Kirby
Northminster Presbyterian Church
January 6, 2019

Every year as Christmas Eve approaches, Jessica and Meredith have grown used to my asking if there will be enough of our young people participating in the Nativity Tableau to need the wise ones. Every year they, perhaps justifiably with decreasing patience, say, "Yes." I guess when it comes to this story, I've become a bit of a fussybudget because it is incredibly important on its own yet a bit distant from the miraculous night of the incarnation.

So, indulge me a bit because, as noted scholar Tom Long has said about this story, when the Bible doesn't give us details, we fill in the blanks. And we've done it so much, I wonder if we've lost the thread of the story.

First, let's get a few things clear. They weren't kings. They were, as best we can figure, astrologers, perhaps even soothsayers, that's literally what MAGI means – those who looked to the stars for answers about our human existence. In other words, they were people whose philosophical and religious practices were condemned by the Old Testament. So, basically, these so-called Kings are actually pagan intellectual elites.

Second, nowhere in scripture does it say there were three of them. There are three gifts, but only in the last thousand years or so have we decided that each wise person brought a separate gift. There are paintings in the catacombs of Rome from the earliest days of the church that depict two wise men or four or, in one case, an army of wise men. Oh, and we assume they are all men. The words used are masculine but under the rubric of that day, if only one of them was a man, the masculine collective noun would be used. Still, given the low social position of women, it's probably a safe assumption they are, in fact, all men – be they two or 2,000.

Third, where is the East? We have no idea. The tradition says Persia or Babylon or India or, in one ancient text that didn't make it into scripture, a land at the end of the world – AKA, Dynastic China.

Fourth, how did they know to come looking for the new king of the Jews? How could they have known there was a prophesy that a star would signify the birth of the King of the Jews? Again, we have no idea. The Jewish vassal kingdom of the Roman Empire was, to be blunt, NOT a big deal. It was a dirt-water country in a dirt-water portion of the Empire. Still, some early Christians said they were responding to either legends that never made it into scripture or were learned scholars of Hebrew apocalyptic writing. And they responded either out of curiosity, or to follow the ancient custom of sending gifts to new

royalty as a sign of political friendship. This was an odd thing to do for a dirt-water kingdom what was really just Rome's plaything and Herod's quaking kingdom.

Notice that the star doesn't lead them directly to Bethlehem, at least not until they stop in and talk to the folks in Jerusalem, including fearful, power-clinging Herod who history tells us was both horribly cruel and violent in suppressing the Maccabean revolt 37 years before and also, as our text indicates, nearing the end of his reign. It is only after the wise ones make inquiry that they learn they should go to Bethlehem.

Notice too that Jesus is no longer a newborn in this story, for the slaughter of the innocent by a desperate Herod targets children up to two years of age, based on what the Wise Ones said about the star. This kind of makes it doubtful that Mary and Joseph were still in anything resembling a stable, doesn't it?

So what are we to make of this story that we have so embellished over the years with our songs and legends and speculation? Perhaps the inclusion of the texts we typically ignore this Sunday, those last 10 verses, provides us a clue. In them we hear of Herod's power-mad slaughter of children, of Joseph's second and third dreams that both protect Jesus and leave the family in Nazareth at the stories' end, and of all those references to the prophecies being fulfilled. The overarching messages of those passages seem to be that God has been and is at work in Jesus' coming into the world. But is that all there is?

Let's break it down even more. Wise folks from – not simply the fringes of the Hebrew faith, but in fact the fringes of the known world – receive wisdom from God in new and strange ways that in the past would have been deemed evil. And they respond to this incomplete wisdom with action. They come with curiosity; they ask around in Jerusalem to figure out what is going on; and then then they are unafraid of having their expectations blown out of the water by this lowly infant child of a Bethlehemite laborer and his child-bride. In fact, they respond joyfully to the surprising discovery of the one they seek. And then they act to preserve this new and wonderful thing they have found. They will not kowtow to a fear monger or be a part of his hateful schemes. And then Joseph receives wisdom from God in new and strange ways (all of those dreams) and responds to these mysterious encounters with action. (Is this sounding familiar yet?) And he goes in hope and expectation, but without any certainty. And then, a few years later, goes again – also without any certainty.

It's a story about subverting power; it's about divine and human action to achieve God's purposes regardless of the power-grasping actions of the people who think they are in charge. Is it any wonder that in the centuries since, when the church and the state eventually became intertwined and the church assumed Herod's mantle of political power as well as spiritual authority that we had to tame the story?

So what do we do? We wrap these hippy intellectuals in royal robes and crowns and give them very, well, noble names – Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar. And we give them a song

and a place at the Christmas Eve creche instead of making them the innocent instigators of Herod's slaughter fest in Bethlehem. We've turned them from outsiders to insiders and from the curious and scientific to the powerful because curious outsiders are scary. They don't play by the rules; they don't go along with all the old ways just because that's how they've been done; they come into spaces they arguably don't belong and change the world. They are always looking for the new thing that the Universe is saying and responding to it with action and inquiry. And that is just risky for everyone.

We live in an age when we are surrounded by Herods, some of our own making. We live in an age where the outsiders are once again feared. We need look no further than our southern border or the media frenzy about so many women, so many young people, so many people of color assuming places of authority in the new Congress that for so long has been a place where people who look like me have held sway. You can hear it in the questions that people are asking: Why can't people just live the way we live, speak the way we speak, follow the rules that we follow.

We live in a time when knowledge is suspect, when pundits who spout age-old prejudices as though they are wisdom get more respect and more followers than scientists and trained professionals. From Global Climate change to Peak Oil to Healthcare to immigration, the Herods of the world don't want to hear what the Universe is telling us – wisdom and welcome, it seems, are no longer in fashion in politics, in some corners of religious life and in some corners of our culture.

It begs the question, what are we to do? We, who like the Magi, long to be "overwhelmed by joy." We, who like Joseph, are seeking ways to provide for those we love, ways to protect, but also ways to be faithful. What if we do what God does to Joseph? What if we put ourselves on the margins, seeking out those places where the Magi had their initial encounters with wisdom that led them into action? Where are the margins for us? Among the poor? Among the unchurched? Among those who speak a different language or practice a different religion than we do? Among those who wait on our southern border to have their asylum cases heard – if, in fact, they ever will be heard.

And then, what if we were to respond to what we learn in those marginal places with action, like Joseph? What if we look for the guiding stars that God is already placing among those on the margins, stars that will show us the way to where Christ is already at work? What if we then responded to the challenges and new things we find there, not with fear but with action and curiosity? What might that look like? And then, what if we respond – to those around us who are captive to fear of change, to those burdened with willful ignorance – by refusing to become pawns in their destructive, cruel efforts to maintain power and influence? What if we choose to go home another way than through the seductive courts of power and prestige? And, instead of waiting for a message in a dream, we discern together – having hard conversations where we listen to one another, listen to the fears and concerns and insights and perspectives around us – and together find our way back to Nazareth.

I'll tell you, that's not easy. That requires vulnerability from each of us; it requires taking a fresh look at our assumptions about one another, particularly those with whom we disagree. But it also requires being willing to confront those who, like Herod, are hell-bent on schemes that exploit, endanger and even destroy the lives of others.

What would the Church of Jesus Christ look like? What would we look like, we followers of the new star, the beacon of Christ's love and grace and justice and hope? I'll own it. I'm not sure but I have a sneaking hunch that – in time, in the generations that will follow us – we might just be called the Wise Ones too.