

## ***Wise men? Really?***

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Bedford, NY  
January 6, 2013

Every once in a while I read a portion of the Bible which I assume I know when out of the blue something in it or about it suddenly sounds out of place. And I find myself shaking my head and saying, “*Really?*” And so it is this morning.

Here we are at Epiphany.

In the Christian community, today is the last Sunday in the season of Christmas.

And even though we read their story on Christmas Eve, today we hear the story of the wise men one more time before we put Christmas away for another year.

You probably know the story as well as I do.

And, we began our service this morning hearing it again.

Strange, unnamed foreigners from somewhere east of Israel see a star.

They take it as a sign, and follow the star to Jerusalem.

Then, ratcheting up the tension in the story, they stop in at the royal palace to ask King Herod where the new king is who has just been born. In frantic reaction to the news, scribes and scholars are sent scurrying to search scripture for the answer. A little while later they report back.

“*In Bethlehem,*” both the wise men and King Herod are told.

Then, leaving one King and in search of another, they see the star again and follow it to Bethlehem.

There they find Jesus and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Then, because of a dream (this after following a star), they head back home by a different way in order to avoid both Jerusalem and Herod.

As I read the story again in preparation for this morning, here is what I found myself wondering about. In the original Greek, the word used to describe those who came in search of Jesus is *magi*, the plural of the word *magos*. When and how and why, I began to wonder, did those star gazers/star followers become known as and referred to as *wise men* rather than the more accurate translation of the original Greek word which means *astrologer*? And, why, even in this day of more and more accurate translations, does this mistranslation persist?

But, before I go any further, a word of background in case you wonder if there is any historical accuracy to this story. Scholars speculate that around the time of the birth of Jesus there was a priestly group located in the area that is present day Iran and Iraq that was known for its astrology. Members of that group may have had the financial resources to undertake a several month journey from someplace like Bagdad to Jerusalem. 550 miles one way. 25 miles/day if you travel by camel. And, at that time, astrology was highly regarded as a science. So they were certainly learned, but, as you and I know, that *being learned* doesn't necessarily mean *being wise*.

So, I am still left with my question.

Why persist in mistranslating the word?

Why *wise men*?

And, is there really anything *wise* about packing it all up and following a star?

So, allow me to play with the text for a moment...

Hopefully to help make my point.

I am showing my age with this question, but how many of you remember the comedian Bill Cosby? When I was growing up, my family loved to listen to his comedy sketches on the LP records we had. One of those sketches was a conversation between Noah and God with God telling Noah to build the arc. Some of you may remember it. As I was thinking about our text for today I could imagine a similar conversation between the *magi/wise men* and their families that might go something like this: (With my sincere apologies to Bill Cosby...)

*Honey, I have something to tell you.*

*Oh no, not again.*

*Well, it is different this time.*

*Really?*

*Yes. I have seen a star.*

*Great. I can see stars, too. Now can I get back to work? (You don't seem to do any.)*

*No, this star is different. It's almost as if it is speaking to me.*

*Do you need to see a doctor?*

*No, really. It is telling me to follow it.*

*You do need to see a doctor.*

I wish I was smart enough and/or funny enough to go on, but my point is this.

In real time...

Maybe even for those magi of old...

Those individuals who see and follow stars are rarely considered wise.

Instead, more often than not, they are considered foolish or misguided or dreamers, at best.

Or troublemakers or subversive or crazy, at worst.

Think about it for a moment...

Who would you name as those who saw and followed a star; a vision of how life and world could be that significantly altered our understanding of *normal* or significantly transformed our sense of the status quo? Here are several that I would name:

Martin Luther King, Jr. in our country?

Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa?

Archbishop Romero in Central America?

And maybe today, Dr. Eboo Patel in his vision for interfaith understanding and partnership?

Maybe even Bedford Presbyterian Church when it agreed to provide shelter for those who had no place to stay when few in the community would even acknowledge there were homeless among us.

I am sure you could name others in your particular discipline or field of expertise.

Visionaries/star gazers who were, at first, discounted or discredited or told that what they were doing was not possible or was too disruptive at the time only to be honored and understood – considered wise – at some later date.

My point is this...

Those who step outside accepted norms and accepted ways of thinking about life and world and how life and world might be...

Those who see and dare to follow stars that the rest of us can't or won't see...

Are better understood and better accepted looking back rather than in the moment in time in which they have to decide and to act.

Which brings me to this...

Are there stars that wait to be seen right now?  
What are those signs around us of something new that is about to be born?  
Stars and signs that turn us in the direction of the best impulses of our religious traditions – peace and sufficiency and inclusion and understanding?  
Stars and signs that await someone with enough vision and enough courage to see and to follow and to lead the way?

Here is what I believe...  
If what the Bible says here is true...  
Not necessarily factual, but true in the best and deepest sense of that word...  
If this Epiphany story of stars in the sky and magi or wise men who follow is true...  
Then it is not just about then, but also about now.  
And, not just about them, but also about you and me.  
Which means the story from back then waits to unfold again this day.  
And, standing as we are in the tradition of those magi of old;  
It means that you and I have some part to play...if we dare.  
If we dare enough to see a star.  
If we dare step beyond what we know or what is safe.  
If we dare to undertake the journey...  
Not quite knowing where it will lead or what we will find.

*Honey, I have something to tell you.*  
*Oh no, not again.*  
*Well, it is different this time.*  
*Really?*  
*Yes. I have seen a star.*

Let me end with this.

From a Franciscan Benediction:

*And, may God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world; So that you can do what others claim cannot be done.*