

Second Sunday After Christmas Day: January 3, 2021

The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven

Taking Risks to Respond to God's Calling

The story of the three magi who came from the East to find and bring gifts to the newborn King has captured the imagination of artists, poets, song-writers, scholars, preachers and many others. The story has been told in children's books, performed in Christmas pageants, and illustrated on Christmas cards. Despite all this interest, there is not too much that we know with certainty about the magi.

We assume that there were three magi because of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh mentioned in scripture. Gold has been associated with the kingship of Christ, incense with Christ's divinity, and myrrh with Christ's redemptive suffering. The three gifts have been understood to symbolize virtue, prayer, and suffering.ⁱ We do not know if the magi were men or women because the language in the original Greek does not indicate their gender. We do not know exactly where they came from. We are only told that they came from the East, which could have been Persia (modern day Iran), East Syria, or Arabia. And, we have no details about how far or long they travelled.

In later Christian tradition in the western church, the magi were given the names Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. Casper was considered to be black. In this way, they represented Gentiles and the racial diversity of the Gentile world. They foreshadowed the mission to preach the Good News of Jesus to all of the Gentiles. They also represented the pagan world in contrast to God's kingdom on earth beginning with Abraham and continuing through to the birth of Jesus.

The word *magi* is translated from the Greek word that refers to "wise men" or "astrologers." It was a term used to describe a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, including astrology and the interpretation of dreams.ⁱⁱ In the ancient world, astrologers studied the stars to prophesy the birth of other prominent rulers, such as Alexander the Great. Prophetic dreams played an important role in the Old and New Testaments. In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew we learn that the magi were warned in a dream not to return to the devious King Herod and so they returned to their home taking a different road. Those who like the magi saw the star of Bethlehem or who experience a prophetic dream are called by God to respond in faith.ⁱⁱⁱ What is perhaps most important is that the magi responded faithfully by following the light from the star and they came to pay homage to Jesus.^{iv}

I wonder what motivated the magi to travel such a long distance. What was it that was calling them to follow the light of the star of Bethlehem? Was it a tug that they simply could not resist.^v Why were they not just content to know that the birth had happened? Why did they want to be there in person to witness this extraordinary event? Perhaps they had their own doubts and just wanted to go and find out for themselves if this birth had really happened. Whatever the reason, it seems that a deep inner voice was calling them: a voice as deep within them as the stars were deep within the sky.^{vi}

A calling to encounter Christ or to come closer to Jesus is often an experience like this. Speaking from my own experience in my calling to become a priest, it felt very

much like a voice deep within me that kept tugging at me over many years. There were so many things that I did not know. If the wise men had questioned whether or not this event had really happened and was authentic, I also questioned whether this vocational call that I was discerning was genuine. Perhaps like the wise men, I realized that I would not know for sure until I went. I had to act and see for myself.

Like the wise men, I did not know what to expect. I did not know how long the journey would take or if I would be successful. I did not know how easy or hard the journey would be or whether there would be people who would help me along the way. However, I did know that no matter what happened or how hard the journey, I could absolutely depend on God to remain with me and guide me. In our own personal journeys to become closer to Jesus, there are many things we do not know. We just need to be willing to venture out, even if we do not have all the answers.

The magi had the vision to see what others could not see. Even though they found the infant Jesus born in a dingy, damp manger in the tiny town of Bethlehem, they recognized him as the newborn King and honored him. Can we see the face of Jesus in the homeless, the hungry, widows and their children, prisoners, immigrants and migrant workers, while some others fail to even see them?

The magi brought gifts to pay homage to the infant Jesus. As you think about your own spiritual journey, you might ask yourself what gifts you can bring to give to others. We each have unique God-given gifts that we can offer—the gift of friendship, teaching or tutoring, music, carpentry, gardening, writing cards and letters with words of comfort, praying, preparing food, providing transportation for someone who does not drive or own a car, and so on.

The magi took great personal risks by leaving the security of their homeland and traveling through the dangerous and foreign terrain of the cruel and despotic King Herod. They were guided solely by the light of the star of Bethlehem. What risks might we be willing to take in our own journeys of faith? What security might we have to let go of in order to draw closer to Jesus?

In 2020, we were forced into unfamiliar territory as a result of all the disruptions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to adopt new ways of conducting our worship and continuing our mission and ministry in Madison County. As much as we may want to, we will not be able to return to the way things were before the pandemic. Our world has been changed in profound and long-lasting ways. Like the magi returning home, we must also take a different route as we move forward in the future.

God is ever present working in our lives and in the lives of others in ways that are seen and unseen. As the Dutch Renaissance humanist and theologian Desiderius Erasmus famously said: “Bidden or unbidden, God is present.” The magi did not know God in the way the Judean people did or in the way that we do as Christians today. And yet God’s sign in the star of Bethlehem led them to be a part of God’s plan of salvation for the world.^{vii} How might God be calling us to be part of God’s continuing plan to bring hope, healing, justice and salvation for all people and all nations? How can we respond and act to be a part of God’s plan? If we do, like the magi we can discover things that are marvelous beyond our wildest hopes and dreams.

Gracious and loving God, embolden us to take risks, to try new things, and to venture into new territory to share the Good News of the birth and life of Jesus, your beloved Son and our Savior. Amen.

ⁱ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 636.

ⁱⁱ The New Interpreters Bible, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abington Press, 1995), p. 140, 142.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, “Will You Follow?” 2 Christmas, January 3, 2021, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/will-you-follow-2-christmas-january-3-2021>.

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 142.

^v Barbara Brown Taylor, Home by Another Way, p. 28.

^{vi} Frederick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark (New York: HarperCollins Publications, 2006), p. 12.

^{vii} The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, “Will You Follow?” 2 Christmas, January 3, 2021, <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/will-you-follow-2-christmas-january-3-2021>.