

By Another Way
 A Sermon by Eric Dillenbeck
 Fairmount Presbyterian Church
 Cleveland Heights, Ohio
 3 January 2010
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Today we are enjoying the second Sunday of Christmas, a season marked by the celebration of the birth and recognition of the Christ Child. Our passage today is the familiar story of the wise men, who follow a star to see the one who has been foretold. When they reach the Christ Child they experience an epiphany. When in his presence they suddenly comprehend the meaning of that moment and are forever changed. As we listen for God's Word speaking to us this day from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12 may we open ourselves to experience an Epiphany.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another way.

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A few weeks ago I was almost late for worship because I was in my office discussing today's passage with a few Church School teachers. Some great questions quickly rose to the top of that conversation:

*"Did this story REALLY happen?
 Were there only three magi?
 Did they really follow a star?
 Do I believe it really happened?
 Is it TRUE?"*

I really wanted to spend time with these questions and unpack our responses, but I was needed elsewhere at the time. I have been pondering that conversation ever since. At times in the course of the discussion I think we all confused the actual details of story with the tradition of the story. This happens a lot, because the story is SO familiar to all of us. How many

pageants have we seen where there are ONLY three wise men dressed in bathrobes and crowns? In fact, how many pageants have we seen where these characters have names?

Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar are the names widely accepted for these three foreign dignitaries who went searching for the new ruler of Israel. Where did these names come from? The names and number are not in the Biblical story, but tradition has shaped our understanding of this text as much as the story itself. *(Just so you know, the wise men were actually known by a variety of names until the Middle Ages when the church harmonized the varying accounts.)*

The text only tells us that wise men came from the east bearing three types of gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Through the years we interpreted that to mean there were only three travelers, but that is not what Matthew says. Matthew says, "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." (v.1)

The truth of the matter is "we do not know who these wise men were, where they were from, or how many of them were there. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got thereⁱⁱ." We do not know the TRUE facts, we were not there. But that does not mean the story is not true.

This story has POWER, not because it gives us the best facts, but because it says something about Jesus and about God's plan for his life and ministry. And by doing so, it says something POWERFUL about our lives.

In the Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' birth, these Wise Men, these outsiders, are the very first ones to recognize the Christ Child. It wasn't the Jewish shepherds tending the sheep, it wasn't the Jewish inhabitants of Bethlehem, it was group of strange travelers from a foreign land who recognize the importance of this moment and pay homage to Jesus.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew is considered to be the most Jewish of all the Gospel writers. How can we know this? Well, this is because his writing reflects an uncanny familiarity with the Hebrew Scriptures and the customs of the synagogue. It is believed that his primary audience was other Jew's who would appreciate his many references to the prophecies of the messiah. Matthew begins his Gospel, written primarily for other Jews, by saying that the first visitors to come see this new king, this new messiah, were total outsiders, were pagans.

They were the first ones to bring gifts and worship Jesus. In doing so, Matthew says from the beginning that this baby, this Messiah, this gift from God, is not only for the Jews, but for the WHOLE world.

He wasn't only for those who knew the prophecies of old, but for those who were new to recognize him. He wasn't only for those considered acceptable, but for all people everywhere, even us. These wise men came from the east to pay homage and they left by a different way because of an angel's warning. This is what the text tells us, but my best guess, is they would have gone home by another way even without that warning.

They traveled so far, they knelt down and in that moment they realized the true significance of this birth, the true nature of this new king; they enjoyed an epiphany that has been retold for centuries. So yeah, they went home by another way because there was no other way for them to return. These wise men were not the same people they were when they began their journeys. They were transformed by this encounter and had to go by another way.

We don't know everything about this story. We can't pin down all of the facts and we can't explain the super natural movement of that star, but we don't need to. There is so much truth in this story that we just can't ignore it. There is something so foreign, yet so familiar about it. And here it is: We are a people on a journey. This is what I tell the members of our Confirmation class each year and this is what I will tell you.

We are the wise men. We often feel like awkward outsiders who journey through life in search of Christ in the world; we carry with us gifts that we seek to lay beside the Christ Child. Our gifts are not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but our time our talent and our treasure.

We journey through life searching for the right place to find meaning, the right community to find friendship and family, the right moment when everything will make sense, we are searching for an Epiphany. That moment of Epiphany is not easy to come by and it is not in our control. We want the journey to be short and sweet, but as the wise men teach us the journey is long and we sometimes go the wrong places. But as we make this journey of faith we are transformed, we are not the same people we were at the beginning and for that reason, like the wise men, we have to go home by another way.

As we come to the table today, we continue in the footsteps of the wise men. We come because we know God has done a new thing in the world and we come because we know in this meal God sustains us for the journey. May this meal be an Epiphany for all of us. May we know the real presence of Christ in our midst and may we leave this place transformed to go out into the world to live another way, to live a more faithFULL and faithfilled life.

ⁱ J.C.J. Metford, The Christian Year. Page 41. 1991

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way. *Home By Another Way*, Page 28