

**“Wise Men from the East”**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**Epiphany Sunday**  
**January 4, 2009**

*“On entering the house, they saw the child with his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.” Matthew 2:11*

If you want to know the truth, I have always been just a little bit embarrassed. After all, Tuesday is Epiphany. Although the Eastern Church celebrates the birth of the Christ Child on that day, those of us in the Western Church have set aside January 6 to celebrate the visit of the supposed “wise men.” Wise men, indeed. Your Bible, like mine, probably has a footnote at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew. That footnote tells us that in the original text, the word for “wise men” is “magi,” which means “astrologers.” Astrologers! You have noticed that The World Herald puts the words of its astrologers right next to the crossword puzzle and on the same page as the funny papers, haven’t you? You do smirk when you are driving down 72<sup>nd</sup> Street and pass that palm and tarot card reader’s house, don’t you? You never stooped so low as to use the inept “What’s your sign?” as a pick-up line, did you? Then aren’t you just a little bit embarrassed when I tell you that we belong to a faith tradition that, for the past 20 centuries, has celebrated the arrival of astrologers from the East? Doesn’t practicing a faith that honors oriental stargazers shake your rather respectable religious demeanor? Perhaps, just perhaps, we need to go back and reconsider this ancient story.

The late Father Raymond Brown, who was one of the most respected Bible teachers of our time, told us that the term “magi” referred to a priestly caste that found its origin way back in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Persia. These were a group of men who studied the constellations for their supposed effect on humans, attempted to interpret dreams, dabbled in wizardry, and tried to predict the future by—among other things—reading the entrails of animals. Little wonder that the Old Testament had little use for people like the magi. And believe me, it just wasn’t the Hebrew Scriptures. Other than the story from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew, the New Testament didn’t have any use for them either. In the Book of Acts, Luke tells the story of Simon Magus, a supposed “wise man” from Samaria, who amazed everyone with feats of black magic. When he saw the disciples

work miracles of healing, he tried to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit from Peter and John, which only earned him their great scorn. Irenaeus, one of the early Church Fathers, labeled Simon “the father of all heresies.” It is no secret that both the synagogue and the church understood the magi to be a part of the irreligious fringe, lumping them in the same category as pagans, false prophets, and idolaters. Yet it is those from this group, presumably three of them, whom we will celebrate this Tuesday. If that is not enough to make you uneasy, then let me remind you of the rest of the story. The way Matthew tells it, it is one that should give you pause to think.

One night, as they gazed deep into the firmament, they saw what they thought to be a star moving through the heavens. Believing that astronomical phenomena have a direct connection to human events, they mounted their camels and began to follow that celestial object. As to whether or not stars actually move in the way that this story suggests is a question that is best left to science. What should concern us is that these magi somehow understood the movement of that star to be an invitation by the God of the Hebrews to follow. And because of that understanding, they accepted its invitation. It is not hard to imagine that their “following” was anything but a walk in the park. Based on who they were and where we know they lived, we can assume that they would have had to cross the arid Persian desert, travel up the Euphrates floodplain, climb the Syrian highlands, and then drop down through the Jordan valley. It would have been a difficult trek of well over 1,000 miles, a journey that would have begun without knowing where it would end, and a pilgrimage that would have cost a small fortune to undertake. Yet on they travelled. When their journey took them to the Jewish city of Jerusalem they stopped and asked for directions—an action, by the way, that some female bible teachers still have a difficult time accepting. The learned of Jerusalem snickered at the naïveté of these so-called wise men. The powerful, especially old King Herod, looked on their motives with great suspicion. Undeterred, they journeyed on, until their travels brought them to the rather insignificant village of Bethlehem and to the nondescript house of a common laborer. There, those who were seen as nothing more than heathens by Jerusalem’s religious establishment, knelt down and worshipped a small child they believed to be a king. What’s more, they left incredible riches—amazing gifts of gold, frankincense, and

myrrh—at the feet of this child they had never even met. Swept away by their emotions, they whole-heartedly gave themselves to what they could not have possibly understood.

On Tuesday we will remember these three superstitious, pre-scientific, stargazing charlatans who let their emotions get the better of them. Admit it now. Aren't you just a little bit embarrassed? Calling these travelers "wise men" seems to be a misnomer, don't you think? After all, we are a sophisticated people. We know better. There is not a single person in this room who would ever consider chasing after a star, let alone place a small fortune at the feet of a child you have never even met. We prefer a religion, and a life, that has a certain amount of order to it. We debate the finer points of theology with similarly minded church people using denominationally-approved curriculum over a cup of hot coffee and a cheese Danish. We worship God on Sunday morning, becoming very nervous if the service lasts over an hour or if the preacher shows even the slightest amount of evangelistic fervor. Base your faith on a moving star? Start out on a journey without knowing where it will end? Let yourself be caught up in the emotion of the moment and fall on bended knee? Why, most of you in this room would rather vote for a Democrat.

But then, might those three have understood something that we don't?

The young priest was proving to be somewhat of an embarrassment. While outdoor preaching was not illegal, it had always been associated with various heretics and unsavory characters of past generations. The leaders of the established Church tried to dissuade the young priest from doing something so foolish. After all, he did have a rather promising career in front of him. He was on the fast track for advancement. Articulate and well educated, he was already a fellow at one of the major schools at Oxford University. Well-read in Patristic literature, he could hold his own in any theological debate. Why throw it all away by preaching to the rabble, they asked him? Why impede a perfectly good career by holding services in a coalfield? These were important questions. And if we are to be honest, even the young priest had his doubts. He noted in his journal that all of his life he had been "so tenacious in every point relating to decency and order

that I should have thought that the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been done in a church.” Yet as he stood on that Bristol hillside on that April morning in 1739 and shared God’s amazing grace with those poor, crude, uneducated miners whose soot-blackened faces were suddenly streaked with tears, John Wesley was smart enough to realize that something quite miraculous was afoot. Watching them respond as they did, it dawned on him that not all of God’s workings in this world, or our response to those workings, were confined to the neat and the orderly. Not all of religion had to make sense. And because that was the case, his life, the miner’s lives, and the life of everyone who dared to call themselves Methodist would never again be the same.

Matthew’s story of the visit of the wise men paints a rather disturbing picture for those of us who are far too comfortable with our well-mannered and logical religion. It reminds anyone who dares to read it that while those leave-everything-behind-and-chase-after-a-star astrologers were offering their gifts to the Christ Child in the little town of Bethlehem, the learned, those duly installed members of the religious establishment, those dignified believers who would never think of leaving the sacred confines of the holy city of Jerusalem were going through the machinations of their neat, orderly, and oh-so decent religion. And as they did, they missed the wonder. They missed the joy. They missed the God who now dwelt among them. As they practiced their time-honored, liturgically correct, and theologically sound traditions of their faith in their well-appointed temple, the good news for which they had waited for so long was being worshiped just 5 miles down the road. What a shame.

And what, my friends, of us? Please know that there is a place for tradition. There is a place for order. There is a place for the reasonable worship of God and for faith that makes sense. Personally speaking, that type of faith and that kind of worship appeals to me greatly. I grew up with it. I was trained in it. I feel comfortable using it. Yet there comes a time in one’s spiritual journey when other options may have to be considered. That is because the journey of faith almost always involves more one’s head. More often than not, it involves one’s heart as well. And as you probably already know, anything that has to do with the heart is not always logical. Why else do well-educated, personally

responsible, and socially respectable grandparents get down on their hands and knees and make absolute fools out of themselves in front of their grandchildren? Why else would a gracious Southern flight attendant move to the frozen tundra of Nebraska? Why else would three so-called “wise men” leave the safety and security of their homes and set out on a journey without even knowing where it would end? None of it makes any sense at all. But then affairs of the heart rarely do. And until we are ready and willing to let go of our logical, proper, and socially acceptable religion, until we are able to set off on a journey that involves both our head and our heart, until we say “yes” to the God who beckons us to follow, then we will simply sit here on Sunday morning and wonder why nothing ever happens in church.

On the altar you will see a loaf of bread and a cup of juice. In just a few moments you will be invited to come forward and partake of each in a ritual that has been observed, in one form or another, every day for nearly 2000 years. Logically speaking, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Each one of us of us is more that aware that bread baked at a local grocery store and juice prepared by a giant corporation possess nothing special in and of themselves. There is nothing magical or miraculous to be found in either. But then, love is not always logical. That is why we can say that if we allow these very common elements to be so, they can become a means of grace for us, avenues that can lead us to the love of the one in whom we live and move and have our being. In and through them we can experience the presence of the one before whom the magi knelt. And in the presence of the child of Bethlehem we can be transformed. In his presence everyone in this room can begin this brand new year brand new.

*O star of wonder, star of light,  
star with royal beauty bright,  
westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect light.*