

SECOND READING: Matthew 2:1-12

pg 2 NT

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “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.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They 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.’” 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then 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.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On 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. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 60:1-6

pg 690 OT

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. This is the word of the Lord... THANKS BE TO GOD.

“Home by Another Way”

We don't know all the specifics. There's actually a great deal of mystery surrounding how it went down. And consequently, the story of the Visitation of the Magi to the Christ child has lent itself to capturing the human imagination very fully over the centuries. Poets like T.S. Elliott, William Carlos Williams, Longfellow, Yeats have crafted it with their words. So also have untold artists variously depicted the event, and storytellers galore spun the tale. Musicians have written operas and ballads and folk songs about the happening of which we know so little. One musical rendition that I really love was written by American song writer, James Taylor... *“Those magic men the Magi,”* he sings, *“Some people call them wise, Or Oriental, even kings, Well anyway, those guys. They visited with Jesus. They sure enjoyed their stay. Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme. They went home by another way.”*¹

James Taylor has some of the few facts we know correct. They did come from the East, probably from Persia, and not all from the same locale, probably they met up on the road. They were men of means who may have travelled as much as 1000 miles on long, arduous journeys. We know that they did not arrive on the same night as the shepherds and the heavenly host, on the night of Jesus' birth, despite what our Christmas pageants, our nativity sets, and Hallmark cards like to depict. They arrived sometime within the first two years of Jesus' life. We know this because of Herod's order to slaughter all the male children aged 2 years and younger.

We don't really know how many of them there were...not necessarily three. Maybe as many as 10 or more. We're told in Matthew only that there were three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh... gifts fit for royalty. Importantly, they were not likely kings, themselves, but wise men. The Bible calls them *magoi*, magicians, wise men, astrologers, men capable of interpreting stars and dreams. They knew that when a bright star appeared in the sky, one that traveled in the wrong direction, from East to West, rather than West to East, (westward-leading) it meant a “great birth” had happened, a king had been born. And this was, for most people, wonderful news! For “a great birth” in ancient times had the potential to bring “great change to the social

¹ James Taylor. *“Home by Another Way.”* https://www.lyricsfreak.com/j/james+taylor/home+by+another+way_20069229.html. (accessed 1/4/19).

order'.² Of course, it also had, the potential for those already in power to bring the end to their dominance. "Great change to the social order" might be equivalent to saying "political revolution" to some. This was the case for King Herod of Judea. He was a very insecure and paranoid man, who, when the wise men visited him in Jerusalem to inquire about the birth of a king, went immediately for counsel by HIS star gazers. They, of course, also knew the Jewish prophesy about the coming Messiah being born in Bethlehem. Herod was positively terrorized, and, as James Taylor sings, "*he schemed*". He asked the magi to return once they'd found Jesus' in order that they might give him the exact location and he might also go to worship Jesus. However, he was planning to eliminate the future threat to his throne. But being warned in a dream of Herod's intentions, the wise men, (however many there were, whoever they were), did not return to Herod, but went home (to wherever that was) by another way.

That's about it! That's all we really know about the journey of the Magi, except of course, except, of course, we know that they made that journey. And this is where the theological lesson for us is to be had. These men made a journey. They were paying attention. They were listening, watching, waiting for God's communication to them, and when they received it, they trusted it and acted on it.

Throughout all time God has spoken to people through nature, especially through the stars. If you recall, Abram went out at night and heard a promise from God that he would have many children, as numerous as the stars. Stars are said to "Sing together" and "shout for joy" in the Book of Job, and Psalm 147 tells us God names all the stars and determines their number.³ These men, these gentile men, were paying attention to the stars. Episcopal Priest David Peters says, "*Just as every human culture is unique and different, the ways in which different cultures find and understand Jesus will be different, too. We cannot predict or assume how the diverse cultures within the communities of the world will find Jesus. We must be open to all the ways the Spirit leads and has led people to the Savior.*"⁴

² Emerson Powery. "*Connecting the Reading with Scripture. Epiphany of the Lord Mt 2:1-12*" (Louisville: WJKP: 2018), 155.

³ David Peters. "*Stars. Epiphany*" <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/stars-epiphany-january-6-2019> (accessed 1/4/19).

⁴ David Peters. "*Stars. Epiphany*".

So, again, my point...the wise men, these gentile men were paying attention. They were open to what God was telling them. They gave their attention to the sign....the star in the night sky. It was there certainly for anyone, for everyone to see. It was in plain sight, there in the heavens for all of humanity. But THEY were the ones who had their eyes peeled for what God's universe would reveal, and they followed the star. It led them to the Christ & they fell down and worshiped.

You know, it's been said that "it's hard to find what you're not looking for."⁵ God provides messages all day long for us if we would just stop long enough from our busyness, from our many distractions, and open our eyes and ears and pay attention to what is there around us to see and hear. Through nature, through friends, through current events, through happenings in our lives, through surprise thoughts, God speaks, seldom audibly but nevertheless, God speaks. Frederick Buechner's famous quote bears repeating. "*Listen to your life,*" he says. "*Listen to what happens to you, because it is through what happens to you that God speaks. It's in language that's not always easy to decipher, but it's there, powerfully, memorably, unforgettably.*"⁶

Now, unfortunately, the wise men lost their focus for just a bit, didn't they? They stopped off in Jerusalem to visit another king about a king. Maybe they were just naïve, unaware of the dangerous politics of Judea. But they weren't too wise when they did that. They let Herod in on their starlit message, and then they followed Herod's direction to Bethlehem. It was a hiccup for sure. This error in judgement resulted later in thousands of innocents being slaughtered by Herod's sword, by Herod's self-serving paranoia, and it necessitated the need for the Holy family's fleeing their homeland, their need to escape as refugees from the violence in Judah to Egypt. "Lapses in attention can be devastating,"⁷ can't they? The magi eventually realized that Herod's way was not God's way. They listened to God's voice in a dream and they did not return to report back to Herod.

⁵ Scott Spencer, "Home by Another Way" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZQ5Bv5FVLO> (accessed 1/4/2019).

⁶ Frederick Buechner. From "*Listening to Your Life : Daily Meditations* with Frederick Buechner". http://m.explorefaith.org/faces/my_faith/borg/listening_for_the_voice_of_god.php (accessed 7-25-14).

⁷ Scott Spencer, "Home by Another Way"

Friends, there are only two ways in the world...God's way and that which is not of God, and while I don't mean to make it sound as though it is always easy to discern the difference... things are complicated...the older I get, the more I see that. But I KNOW that if the way leads us to be jealous, and threatened and insecure, if it causes us to be manipulative, narcissistic, and self-serving, self-seeking, self-adulating and self-advancing, if it results us trying to stand on our head to justify what we are doing or if it directly or indirectly results in our condoning wanton violence, or thievery or a disregard for life, then IT IS NOT OF GOD. But if it is a way which leads us to fall down and worship, to seek God's light revealed in Jesus Christ, to love neighbor, to give of our time, our talent our treasure, our very lives to others, to witness to the right and greater truth, to desire change in a social order such that the weak are better supported or the sick are more cared for, or the hungry are better fed, or those who are different, or who are left outside are invited in, well, then IT IS OF GOD and we need follow that way.

Before I close today, I must read to you, not sing-mind you, read the lyrics of the rest of James Taylor's song, "*Yes they went home by another way, Home by another way, Maybe me and you can be wise guys too, And go home by another way. We can make it another way, Safe home as they used to say. Keep a weather eye to the chart on high. And go home another way.*

Steer clear of royal welcomes. Avoid a big to-do. A king who would slaughter the innocents, will not cut a deal for you. He really, really wants those presents. He'll comb your camel's fur, until his boys announce they've found trace amounts of your frankincense, gold and myrrh.

Well, it pleasures me to be here, and to sing this song tonight. They tell me that life is a miracle And I figured that they're right. But Herod's always out there. He's got our cards on file. It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch old Herod likes to take a mile.

It's best to go home by another way. Home by another way. We got this far to a lucky star. But tomorrow is another day. We can make it another way. Safe home as they used to say. Keep a weather eye to the chart on high, and go home another way.⁸

⁸ James Taylor. "Home by Another Way." https://www.lyricsfreak.com/j/james+taylor/home+by+another+way_20069229.html. (accessed 1/4/19).

In this new year, brothers and sisters, let's be people of wisdom. (*hold up Bible*) Let's make our resolutions to heed our Creator's will for our lives. Let's not listen to the Herods of the world and let them rob us of the true meaning of the season which needs last our whole lives long. Let's pay attention. Let's pay attention to God speaking in our lives and go home this new year by another way. Amen.