

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Feast of the Epiphany Year B 2018
Text: Matthew 2
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Title: Hidden Among the Stars

The story of the *Three Magi from the East* is one that captivates our imaginations with ease. We love the image of distinguished noble philosophers and scientists of old in search of the meaning of life, following a star or a comet or an astrological sign that drew them out of their ordinary lives and far from home to the one hidden among the stars.

Over time this story has been refined and tamed a bit. Poets and song writers have wrapped their arts around it and one poet, Longfellow, even dared to give the three sages names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. There have been countless paintings of the scene at the stable with the bejeweled and bedazzled Magi kneeling in homage to the infant Christ squirming in the feeding trough with the host of heaven, the beasts of the fields and the wonderstruck shepherds along with the pious Mary and Joseph looking on. But if you actually read Matthew it's not really clear who these wise ones from the east were and how many of them there actually were or where exactly they came from. The gospel of Matthew, it seems, is a little vague on the facts but that has not stopped people from finding a great deal to love and reflect upon in this story.

As one preacher noted, "It is not that the facts don't matter. It's just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and the stories can be true whether they happened or not." What is important about stories is not just the facts but what the story itself does to those who embrace it and really listen to what it is saying. Some people want to cut the world up into neat little compartments of what actually literally happened and what did not happen but there, of course, is another way home. This is the way people of faith throughout the centuries have practiced, that of listening to the story itself, taking it to your loving heart and discovering within yourself the truth of the story. Stories that are deeply true have a way of moving us, we sense that they are true in a way that doesn't need scientific proof or an argument, we know they are true because they make us laugh and cry at the same time. The truth of a story can be felt. And one of the most important tests of a truthful story is whether the story when heard and embraced over time makes one more human. Does the story open people up to the world around them? Does it expand their heart or generosity toward others? Does it make them people with more capacity for love and joy? These are the tests of a story that is true in the most important of ways.

So, in the spirit of a truthful story, I'd like to have a bit of serious fun with a story that we have all come to love and cherish.

Long ago, in a powerful country to the northeast of Judea. there lived sages who studied the stars, puzzled over world politics, gave advice to the ruler of the realm, and traveled on official state business as it suited them. The truth was that they were philosophers, intellectuals, scientists, thinkers and they all had various specialties and interests that were on occasion useful to the realm. Some thought of them as magicians, but they knew that this was not true. They were able to point out things or predict happenings because of their astute observations and careful calculations. In fact, they were able to point out the star because of the careful work they'd been doing for years on the movements of the planets and motions of the stars. The public thought they were amazing magicians, but they knew the truth of the matter. What was amazing was what was happening in the night sky, and so amidst a great deal of adulation and acclaim they set off to investigate what the heavens where trying to tell them.

At first, they set off on their own from different places around the kingdom of Persia. They did not know that the others were seeking the secret of the star as well. But then something curious began to happen. At inns and coffee shops along the way they began to see each other. "Hey didn't I see you at the last Starbucks? You were drinking cappuccino, weren't you?" At the beginning it seemed a strange coincidence that other star-gazing intellectual types seemed to be in the same espresso shops. Eventually, then, they began to visit with one another, as it was comforting to find others who spoke their language so far from home. Their travels seemed to be going the same direction and they in fact knew many of the same people back in Persia. They talked politics and foreign policy and began to gather in the evenings to share their observations of the night sky.

Then one day, as they enjoyed their dark roast in the corner of a small independent coffee roaster's shop, one of them dared to share his own inner thoughts out loud. It was hard to put into words but he was on this trek not because of any particular official mission, but because of an unmistakable attraction to the star in the sky. Of course the star was amazing, a comet-like wonder that he couldn't take his eyes off of, but that wasn't all. Somehow, he felt drawn by the star, pulled toward something that he could not explain. There was he felt something spiritual is this journey and though he wasn't prone to using that kind of language he'd almost say that there was a god-like force pulling him along. And so there it was out there on the table for all of his brainiac companions to ponder. Of course, they were not used to this kind of vulnerability and thus stared into the depths of their lattes for quite some time. Then finally, one-by-one, a look of relief came over their faces and then laughter curled at the edges of their mouths. And all at once they began to smile and laugh and cry and slap each other on the back like old friends. They all had been feeling it, the strange calling of the star and it had pulled them out of their studies and onto their camels, out of their ordinary lives out into the wilderness on an adventure that none of them had been seeking but yet all were desiring.

For then on they traveled in a group of star-crossed brothers, and though one early theologian and bishop, Tertullian, would insist that they were kings in his commentaries, they were no such thing. They were star-struck wanderers who knew that “all who wander are not lost.”

Their journey brought them into Roman lands and into the kingdom of Jerusalem, where Herod was a ruler. They had heard of the king and knew from their studies and conversations along the way that Herod was getting old and that change was in the air. They also knew that Rome had its hands full keeping the Jewish people under control as they were prone to insurrection and revolution behind one charismatic leader or another. They decided to go to the palace first which seemed only logical to them, that the most important things happening would be known there first. They found easy admittance to the palace as their cultured ways and sophisticated appearance set them apart. Meeting King Herod, however, was not at all what they'd expected. He was old and huge from the all the feasting and he smelled bad and seemed not the least bit interested in their story until they asked him a question about the next king and if he knew where they might find him. At that point Herod's ears perked up and his eyes narrowed and became menacing and fiery as he interrogated their interest in a new king. They could see the desperate lust for power in the tightness of his jaw. It was easy to answer Herod's questions because in truth they did not know anything more than the attraction of the star that had drawn them to this strange and foreign place. Herod's own sages seemed to know more than they about a king born in an out of the way place called Bethlehem, but it was an obscure oracle and no one knew what it meant and nothing good ever came out of Bethlehem, well aside from King David, the greatest king that Israel had ever had, so the prophecy must have been all used up and dead by now.

The travelers finally took their leave of King Herod after offering him gifts from their own countries. They were relieved to get out of the palace and back into the open air. Herod's breath had smelled awful and he seemed so slimy and not a little cruel by the end. They had the feeling that they were being followed for a while but lost them in the tangled alleys of Jerusalem and through the crafty work of some street performers they had befriended at a local coffee shop.

They made their way travelling mostly at night now so they could see the star and enjoy the cool night air. It led them to the city of Bethlehem. After being on the road so long it was strange and surprising that they all sensed that this was the city they had been searching for all along. The star led them to a small one-room house that was not at all what they were expecting. It didn't look like the place for a king or a significant event or a political rally, but there they were on a side street in Bethlehem. They looked at each other furtively for a while, not quite knowing what to do, should they knock on the door, could this really be the place toward which they had been wandering for so many weeks. Was there a coffee shop nearby where they could talk things over first? But finally, Caspar dismounted and walked right up to the door and knocked.

It was hard to tell who was more surprised when the door opened. The mother and father were startled that it wasn't a neighbor or relative bringing a meal but these road-weary, yet distinguished travelers. While they had almost forgotten their manners entirely, they did remember that they had some things that would serve as gifts and they grabbed several of them from their bags before accepting Joseph's invitation to enter the humble home.

It was simple, to say the least. It was just one room tidied up as best they could. Only the bare essentials were evident and they had not lived here long just a few days it seemed. What happened next was something that all of them would remember for the rest of their lives. Their eyes were still adjusting to the darkness of the place but there was a splash of light at the center around which they found themselves. Without a conscious decision or even looking at each other they all found themselves on their knees in front of the newborn child. And each of them knew at that moment that they were not only at the end of their quest, but in the presence of something unlike anything they'd ever known. It was strange for all of them had been in the presence of great power, incredible wealth, and beauty all over the world, but this was different and they had never before felt such awe come over them.

In this presence they all seemed tongue-tied. They didn't know what to say. There in front of them a young Galilean girl was holding a newborn child, close to her heart. The child was searching for his mother's breast and wriggling around. The father, Joseph, was puzzled and nervous about these strange visitors, feeling protective of his new treasure.

Caspar thought as he knelt there that he needed to offer some sort of gift and now that he was in front of this new family he knew he wanted to give them something more than the trinket he'd pulled out of his saddlebag upon arriving. As he was turning to run back to their packs one of his companions thrust a package into his hands. He smiled realizing that he wasn't the only one of his companions to have this thought. In his hands was a bag of gold, a good deal of their travelling money and with surprising ease he offered it to the parents or was it to the child in front of him? As it turned out his brothers had felt that no casual or cheap gifts would suffice either so they too offered the best things they had, a flask of myrrh and a bag of fragrant frankincense.

The humble parents were a bit shocked by the gifts. They weren't used to receiving such expensive presents. Mary eventually stammered out a, "Thank You," when she had recovered from seeing a whole bag of gold, more wealth than she'd ever seen in one place. To be sure the gifts were a bit on the strange side, but how could the sages have known they were travelling to see a child. They could have brought something a child would have liked, a soft fuzzy blanket or a shiny toy to dangle above his crib. But no one seemed to notice that the gifts were odd.

To the wise one's surprise the very next thing that happened was that Mary scooped the child up and placed him in their arms so that each of them could hold his small warm body close to theirs. Being intellectuals, they were not accustomed to holding children, but that did not stop them. They became children themselves, laughing and cooing and looking deep into the child's eyes. And somewhere in the depths of those dark Galilean baby's eyes they saw the star that they had been following, they saw their own hopes and dreams, their own longing. It was as if in that simple act of holding a child they had found what they had been looking for all their lives.

Later, Balthazar ran out to get take-out falafel and a side of tabouli and they had a simple picnic feast around the crib. Somehow, they all managed to fall deeply asleep watching Mary nurse the child in the warmth of the room. In the morning, they weren't quite sure what to do now that their search had ended. So, they packed up their things and wrestled their packs onto the camels. Though they knew that the child could not speak and they had only known him for a few hours, all of the wise ones felt like they needed to say goodbye to Mary's child. She laughed and wondered about these strange travelers and what it all might mean.

One-by-one the wise ones approached the child.

The first said, I can't really tell you how important it has been to meet you, just being with you has changed something inside of me, like a part that was broken has been repaired. Thank you, little feller. I'm going to miss you.

The second, kicked the dirt of the house of bit and shuffled around searching for the right words. He had not yet had his morning espresso so he was a little off his game. "Before I came on this journey, I was searching for knowledge that would help me make sense of life, but now that I've met you I feel like I've found a new reason to live and I'm not sure exactly how to say it, but I'm so joyful to know that you were born."

The third wise one approached the child and looked straight into his eyes, "You know, little one, when I looked into your eyes last night I saw something that I'd longed to see all my life, I saw the compassion of God and knew in that moment that I was not alone any longer. I'm so glad that we found you, for you are the gift so many have been waiting for."

They mounted their camels after that and without really needing to discuss matters went home by another way, for all of them thought that Herod had been rather gross and disgusting and besides they'd all had the same odd dream about a new way home. As they crested the hill that night that would put Bethlehem out of sight for good, they looked back again, half hoping to see the star that had led them to the place. Of course, it was not there. But they knew beyond all wisdom what was there in Bethlehem, the one hidden among the stars, the one who had bedazzled them, and that they knew would dazzle the world with those eyes full of light from light.

Note: This piece of imaginative sermon writing about the visit of the Magi at the stable in Bethlehem is inspired by several things. First, a funny story I once told at a St. George's Episcopal school chapel in New Orleans long ago about the three wise men meeting at a PJ's coffee shop. Second, by a wonderful story by Herbert O'Driscoll entitled, Caspar in Conversations in Time, in which he tells a story of meeting the sage Caspar at a conference on science and religion and of their visit to the Christ child. Third, by a few bits of Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon Home by Another Way in a book of that title in which she imagines the visit of the Magi to the stable long ago. I am also grateful for her discussion of what makes a truthful story from which I have borrowed for this sermon. I hope you enjoyed the playful romp of this retelling of the story of the Three Wise Ones and may you like them find what you have been searching for all of your life in the eyes of the Christ child.