

Matthew 2: 1-12 “Home By Another Road” Rev. Janet Chapman 1/5/2025

The story of the magi ranks right up there with the Christmas and Easter stories in terms of inviting the human imagination to soar. Poets like T.S. Eliot, Yeats, and Longfellow have put their story into memorable prose. Contemporary musician James Taylor took the story and composed a lilting piece called “Home By Another Way” while Garrison Keillor told it on NPR’s “Prairie Home Companion.” Hundreds of artists have painted the scene and recently, I stumbled upon a painting from 1487 that I had never seen before. It was painted by Ghirlandaio entitled “Adoration.” (cue slide) In it, the eldest magi kneels before the Christ child in humble worship. Note it is not an infant he greets but clearly a child, which would fit more accurately the timeframe by which it would have taken the magi to travel from the East to meet the child, about 2-3 years. This notable painting is unique because it is the first I’ve ever seen where the Christ child is coyly lifting his loincloth to allow the elder magi to admire his full humanity. I’m not sure why the painter, who happens to be a man, thought that was significant, but enough said about that...

So much has been made of this story, possibly because the Bible tells us so little. We really don’t know who or how many travelers arrived – just because 3 gifts were brought doesn’t mean there were 3 visitors. There’s a fictional story about the Fourth Wise Man that sparks imagination about others that may have originally started on the journey. Matthew tells us they were magi, not kings, which was another word for astrologers, astronomers if you prefer, who paid attention to the stars. Ivy, my youngest, would probably identify them as being a Libra, Scorpio, and Aries or Leo, as they didn’t steer clear of adventurous travels. Whatever they were, they didn’t shy away from risk and as they followed their star charts, they discovered something even Herod’s biblical scholars had missed – the birth of the Messiah. Dante spoke of “the love that moves the stars.” Apparently, Jupiter and Saturn were in alignment about that time; Hailey’s comet passed not long before. “The First Noel” we sang earlier seems to think the star was so bright it was visible even by day as it says, “It gave great light, and so it continued both day and night.” The word “magi” actually serves as the

root from which we get our word “magician.” Something like magic may be at play in the story. John Welwood writes that “Magic is a sudden opening of the mind to the wonder of existence. It is a sense that there is much more to life than we usually recognize... that life contains many dimensions, depths, textures, and meanings extending far beyond our familiar beliefs and concepts.” I confess that my ex-husband being a professional magician when we first met added a definite allure or mystery to our courting and decades of marriage. The magic within the astrologers’ story starts off, as Matthew seems to imply, with an unexplainable longing. They were all in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodges in their eyes. Something beyond themselves was calling to them -it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives. Just seeing that star fills them with great joy; and something unaccountable leads them to follow that light without knowing where it will even take them. An Italian film by Pasolini reveals their arrival at the Bethlehem home to be filled with smiles, taking the baby in their arms, lifting him up, and laughing joyfully together. They greet him as you would any newborn baby -with great wonder and awe, with a genuine sense of magic.

It seems that Matthew didn’t feel it important to divulge too much about those travelers. It’s not that facts don’t matter. It is just that they don’t matter as much as the actual stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not. Barbara Brown Taylor notes you don’t have to be an archaeologist to discover if the stories are genuine or not; you don’t have to spend years in the library combing ancient texts, star charts, or historical records to let the story come to life inside of you. You can decide on the basis of your own experiences, your own tears or laughter whether the story is true. If you are in doubt, it is always a good idea to watch others who have heard the story – just pay attention to how the story affects them over time. Does it make them more or less human? Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase or decrease their capacity for joy? When I encounter the story, especially in the midst of the holidays, I recognize myself in the travelers. I bear gifts, I traverse afar, I pop in with the gifts, celebrate with great joy, and then depart, all too soon. Like those

travelers, I don't get to stay close to the Christ child very long, like Mary and Joseph did. In all the hustle and bustle, I unfortunately keep my distance trying to feel good that at least I gave Jesus a few gifts... thru the offering plate, the Salvation Army kettle, those in the cold on the streets... and then I go on my way. I fume about the commercialism of Christmas, even blaming the magi for kickstarting the whole gift-giving idea to begin with. Jesus certainly didn't remember their visit and command us, "Because I was born, you shall spend endless hours decorating, cooking, shopping for, and wrapping gifts for others on my birthday." Yet there must be something, as James Howell notes, about traversing afar and being as generous as possible with those I love. Maybe the magi can teach us something about giving? More than one scholar has asked what would a baby do with gold or incense, much less myrrh? Theologians have suggested the gifts symbolize Jesus' royalty with the gold, his divinity with the frankincense, and his suffering with the myrrh, but it's hard to say this was the intent of those magi. They did bring gifts of immense value – they brought what were precious to themselves. I tend to bring gift cards because it is easier and more convenient for me, hopefully for the recipient as well. After all, they can get what they want. But I ask myself, "Is life about what we want? What if we can't get what we want? What lesson do we teach when someone gets something they don't want?" These are questions which linger in the air for me as we begin a new year. How can I model the giving and receiving of gifts which are precious in nature, transforming in the meaning of life more than the accumulation of wealth?

Maybe the answer resides in the journey of the magi who were obviously changed by their visit to greet the Christ child. In Matthew's story, he wants us to recognize something beyond the familiar. Every one of us has a longing for God deep inside of us. We don't always recognize this desire for what it is, but we feel it. Our spirits hunger for meaning, our souls for hope, and our hearts for love. There is a light, like a star, that calls us forth and we feel the pull of God's love. But even in those moments, we don't take the risk; we stay where we are and how we are. It is less scary to stay put, then to move toward a light that we are not absolutely certain we saw.

Because for every three or four far-seeing truly wise people, there are a hundred or two who won't see beyond their noses. Most of us are too practical to chase stars, too realistic to tolerate the possibility of magic. But if by some miracle, we tap into that inner pull of God's love and we venture forth, untapped joy awaits. The unconditional love given through Christ changes the recipient wholly and completely.

Barbara Taylor envisions what the day after must have been like for the magi: "The next morning, after meeting the child whose eyes shone with the same star they had seen before they ever left home, the magi couldn't find their stars or star charts anywhere. They looked in all the corners and under the chairs. The baby's mother even shook out his blankets but after an initial panic, the wise ones said never mind, they didn't need them anymore. They had found what they were looking for and would not lose that. As much as they hated to, they guessed they had better be on their way. But they wouldn't be going back through Jerusalem. They had been warned to steer clear of nasty King Herod, as if they needed to be told. Besides, they realized, none of their old maps worked anymore. They would find a new way home. Nothing was the same and they would find themselves going another way. So they picked up their packs and stood in line to thank the child for the gifts he had given them. The baby's mother laughed, "What are you talking about?" They told her so she could tell the child later. "For this home and the love here," said the first wise one, who couldn't remember how to say it in the language of the elite and wealthy, only in the common language of the peasants. "For baby flesh," said the second wise one, who had no interest in living as a hermit any longer, without the hugs and warmth of human flesh. "For a really great story," said the final wise one, who thought telling it might do a lot more for him than walking on coals. Then singer James Taylor chimes in, "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 takes a mile. It's best to go home by another way." And Matthew brings the story to a close on this beginning of the new year, giving us a subtle wink, hoping we all noticed the clues about what life is like once we've met the Divine Child. "They went back to their own homes by another road." May our giving ... and our living follow suit.