

“The Mystery of Going Home”  
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Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany is about many things. It concludes our twelve-day celebration of Jesus’ birth and inaugurates a new season that focuses more on the work of Christ during his life here on Earth. For several weeks, we will hear stories from the Gospels recounting the amazing words and deeds of Jesus – words and deeds that caused many to recognize him as the Messiah in his own day; words and deeds that have continued for centuries to convince people of who Jesus is.

At Feast of the Epiphany, however, we tend to focus on the arrival of the wise men, the magi. We have many traditions about these mysterious figures that go far beyond what scripture reveals. In the entire New Testament, only Matthew mentions them, and though he doesn’t name the wise men, or tell us how many there were, we have long since come to know them as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – the wise men three.

We don’t know where they came from except for a vague reference “from the East.” We also don’t know what happened to them, except that they went home by another way, warned by an angel in a dream to disobey wicked Herod and keep secret the location and identity of the vulnerable infant King. There’s no indication if they made it back home, and if they made it back, what they shared with others or whether anyone believed them. They are ciphers, shadows in the mist, and prime examples of how scripture often speaks loudest with its silences.

We delight in these figures, I think, because they are mysterious, and we crave mystery. Most of us like a good “who-done-it.” They’re fun, but the deeper mysteries

are what really feed us, and that is represented so well by these silhouettes from Matthew's gospel, who arrive from who knows where, consort with a wicked king, complete their pilgrimage with humble adoration, and then simply vanish as if they never there.

We hunger for mysteries that cannot be fully plumbed, no matter how hard we research and speculate. Perhaps this is why conspiracy theories are so popular. They claim to unveil the concealed methods and meanings behind things that puzzle us or arouse our suspicion. Confronted with such mysteries, our imaginations go wild, and we often invent what we cannot discover. This can be very dangerous, but when it comes to these traveling astrologers, there's little harm in it, as long as we remember the main message of their presence.

Of course, that's part of the mystery. Why were they included in the story? I don't see how their absence would have made the story less powerful. Not to suggest that the magi are made up. There's no reason to suspect Matthew's writing fiction here. In fact, one criterion in biblical scholarship is that the weirder something is, the more likely that it's authentic. But why would Matthew include them when many, many episodes in Jesus' life were excluded, by necessity, from the gospel accounts? Many details were forgotten or simply deemed insufficiently important to include. But the visit of an unidentified number of nameless astrologers made the cut.

Why did Matthew include these heathen star-gazers? As proof perhaps that Jesus' identity was evident to all truth seekers, including far-off pagans? Maybe, as some scholars suggest, Matthew was answering some of his contemporary pagan competitors, arguing that *their* predecessors in the arcane arts paid homage and acknowledged the

importance of Jesus from his very birth. In the end, though, we may never know.

Matthew didn't bother to tell us why he wrote what he wrote. He kept his focus on Jesus.

But I think we may infer and extract some meaning from the brief cameo appearance of these magi. The scripture is a living Word full of meaning, some of which cannot be easily discerned, but we can glean great wisdom from the pages of scripture. If we approach the text with an open perspective, humble yet inspired, we may see that the Magi represent all seekers after wisdom. Their journey is our journey, and their anonymity is very much like our own. Who here expects their name to be remembered 2,000 years from now? But our quest for holiness and truth will live on, just as the quest of the magi endured, long after their names and where they'd come from had been lost to the sands of time.

The magi followed a star to find Jesus, and after arriving there and offering gifts, they departed for home. Returning home is very much a part of our journey, too. I don't mean the trip we'll make back to our houses and apartments after worship. Instead, I'm talking about a mystical journey. We seek Jesus and find him, and having found him, we offer gifts of gratitude, and then set off by another Way – a Way Jesus teaches -- to eventually return home.

Home, however, means more than just a dwelling on Earth or in heaven. Ideally, home is less about an address or a structure, and is more about a way of being. Home is about being at peace. Home is about living a life shrouded by the great mystery we call God, a life of Sabbath, of wisdom, of the presence of Jesus. Home is about the childlike awe and wonder of Christmas, a sensation that need not be unique to one or twelve days of the year, but can remain alive in us each day as we revel in the mystery of God.

The wise men mean so much to us, despite their minor role, because we feel connected to them, to their quest, to their desire to find Jesus and return home. Their names are gone, their point of origin never known, yet their witness endures. May we embody their passion for wisdom and seek Jesus continuously, so that every day, we may find ourselves farther along on our journey home. Amen.