

“Crazy Way Home”
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Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

It seems a little crazy to me, these magi torn from home by their shared passion to follow a star. I wonder if they knew from the very start that they were chasing after a newly born Jewish king, or if they came to that conclusion along the way. I suspect it was the latter, that they deduced on the journey where they were being led. I also suspect that people who cared about the wise men worried about them and those who didn’t mocked them. Rainbows don’t lead to pots of Irish gold. In fact, rainbows lead nowhere. They don’t “land” on anything. What a bunch of fools, chasing a star.

But fools they most certainly were not. Ancient magi practiced many arts to find out the future, and how to influence it, but queen among them was astrology, the observation of celestial bodies and their relative positions in the sky. Anyone ignorant of astrology would have never been called magi, wise one.

Today we might scoff at calling such men wise with their primitive superstitions, but they founded — with their naked eyes — what we now call astronomy. And in their lifetimes, magi were revered as experts on how the world worked and why. Yes, I know, it’s astonishing. Experts in earth sciences being respected and revered. So much has changed and not all for the better.

Now magi were regarded with respect because their knowledge made them powerful. Royalty paid them handsomely. What alignment of the stars would be most propitious to launch a war or to schedule a wedding? In fact, it’s a little surprising their kingly clients let them go on

this long expedition. Perhaps they too perceived this odd star's rising as supremely important, an everything-else-can-wait situation.

So off they went, looking for something special, and we've all been there, striving after an idea for a problem: a diet or a workout plan or a treatment plan that might change things for the better, or we've all sought out someone special someone who we hope will bring something more to life. We hunt for bargains online and for meaning inside and for transformation wherever we think we might find it. And we search for signs, too, just like those wise men, and those signs — often mere wisps of inspired intuition— take us on journeys far from what we call home, into the unfamiliar, sometimes traveling on the edge of risk.

But we go anyway, because we can't stand to stay. Yes, there's more than a little magi in each of us, yearning for the truth, for insight into the mysteries of life. I think that's why we love their story so much, why they fascinate us so, because we feel what they felt, search for what they sought. We share so much in common with them.

For instance, we stand rooted in a tradition, just as they did. Tradition has fallen out of favor in our age, demeaned as something stale and out of touch. But everyone's rooted in tradition, even if that tradition is skepticism or cynicism. Magi looked to the stars for answers and leaned on the learning of those who came before them. Nobody else staring at the stars would have been motivated as they were to run after it.

Likewise, we gain our orientation from a long tradition of stories that strike us as reliable — as reliable revelations of who God is, and what God wants, and how we are meant to respond to God. Without that tradition, we wouldn't even know to look, much less where to start looking or how to make sense of what we see.

Yet the tradition doesn't give us all the answers. We have knowledge and wisdom, rightly revered, but to grasp certain truths, we need the immediate experience of them. The magi could have seen the star, and said, "OK, something important is happening in the West, possibly the birth of a king. Let's make note of that and move on." But they didn't. Instead, they left home and literally moved on to wherever the star led.

That's the danger of tradition. It gives so much that we might be tempted to complacency. But part of what tradition does is to compel us, to propel us farther, always reaching out for what we need and desire most, a power that transcends all else, found in the unlikeliest of places, and once we get there we need to embrace our new discovery with gratitude, no matter how little sense it seems to make. Because that's what the magi did.

Do we really think they expected to find a baby king in such a humble state — no guards or palace or gates? They'd been following a star. A star! The second most energetic, potent thing in the whole universe. But when they found Jesus, these great men, counselors to kings, revered and respected, did the only sensible thing. They humbly bowed, offered very costly gifts, and worshipped him.

With the help of God's inspiration, they concluded that in following the second most powerful, energetic thing in the universe, they'd been given the privilege to be in the presence of the first — love. Pure love made fully real in human flesh. The most powerful, energetic thing in all creation.

And then the wise men went back home, using a different route to conceal Jesus' precise location from a very scared, very jealous and murderous King Herod. Now here is where our paths diverge somewhat from the magi. They needed to keep where Jesus was a secret. That's no longer necessary. No tyrant can destroy Jesus anymore, unless we keep him secret.

Unfortunately, we often do, and let me tell you, when we stay silent about Jesus and how people can find him, then we earn the gratitude of every violent, greedy, manipulative, power hungry tycoon, politician, and petty bully on the planet. It's sickening to think just how grateful they are to us when we keep Jesus a secret.

No, unlike the magi, God calls us to follow Christ, the Morningstar who knows no setting, wherever he leads, and along the Way, draw as much attention to Jesus as possible with fierce praise, with singing that blows the roof off and the windows out. We are called to go home by another Way, yes, because Jesus leads to where our true home is to be found — in him.

With Paul and the Ephesians, God calls us “to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the Church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”

But so often we don't follow so well or make much noise, because somewhere along the line we've gotten the message, and believed it, that faith is a private thing, not to be shared with others lest they feel put upon or offended. That's garbage, serious Grade A garbage, full of poopy disposable diapers and rotten cauliflower.

Do you think the magi kept their mouths shut once they got back home? Imagine them breathless, standing in a king's chamber far to the East of Bethlehem. “You're not going to believe this, and you may not like it much if you do, but that star led us to . . .” How could someone keep quiet?

If on your way home you saw a gas station selling for 10 cents a gallon, you'd SMS every contact in your phone, and people would tell that story over coffee or cocktails endlessly. “Do you remember that crazy gas station owner?” That's the sort of fierce enthusiasm and delight Jesus deserves.

What holds us back is hard to say. Maybe we just assume that everybody's already heard the story and made up their minds, so why bother? But many people, especially in younger generations, have not heard a coherent, truthful story. They get little slivers here and there, but not enough to stir much excitement, much less commitment. Or how about the people who've heard a version of the Jesus story heavy on the scary side, heavy on wrath and vengeance and a long list of don't do's? Or maybe we know all too well that more and more people think Christians are gullible little fools chasing after stars.

None of it matters. Can a person waste time sharing the Gospel? Worst case scenario you get ignored or someone ridicules and patronizes you. Best case scenario, you play a modest role in someone putting their faith in Jesus, or you find someone already on the Way and you can become companions. Is inconvenience or embarrassment an issue when it comes to love? But these disincentives are only the surface, I think.

Deeper down, we harbor the suspicion, if not the confident belief, that we just aren't good enough. We don't know the story well enough. Our shortcomings and failures make us feel like frauds when we talk about Jesus. Perhaps some feel like hypocrites, forgetting that hypocrites are not people who try and fall short. Hypocrites are people who say they aspire to something great, without the smallest intention of doing anything about it. That's not us. We try.

The truth is, none of us are worthy. Those pagan, Gentile magi certainly weren't worthy, but they were prone to paying attention to things, prone to allowing their imaginations room to roam. They were willing to leave home with no guarantee of success. How do you chase down a star?

So when perfectly reasonable objections arise in our minds and hearts, what do we say? Yes, good point, but nevertheless, I'm going. Yes, but the blazing light of Christ's love

overcomes the objections, pronounces them null and void, and frees us to follow the star of love.

Who knows where Jesus might take us? Who cares? Because it's the only Way I know of that can lead us home. Amen.