

Epiphany – Warning: Go Home by Another Road

Last year on Epiphany, Linda shared a story written by Henry Van Dyke called *The Other Wise Man*. In it, he imagines a fourth wise man – also an astrologer from the east - who like his other fellows, saw the star in the sky indicating the birth of a king. This wise man, however, never makes it to see Jesus because of unexpected encounters along the way. Each unexpected encounter is an opportunity for the wise man to perform acts of charity. While the wise man spends many years seeking out Jesus, he never gets to meet him prior to Jesus' crucifixion. The story ends, however, by indicating that every act of charity this wise man performed with those he met in need, was itself an encounter with Jesus. He had indeed met Jesus in the face of the least of these (cf. Matt. 25).

Van Dyke's imaginative telling of the story of a fourth wise man can help us, I think, as we seek to hear, as if for the first time, the story of the magi who visited Jesus some time after his birth. In particular, I like how van Dyke's book invites us to focus on the passage of time in the Magi's story, given that our telling of their story often is done and over in a few short sentences tagged onto the end of the birth narratives.¹ "Jesus was born – the wise men came with gifts fit for the newborn king, then they left." Done. This last week, Melodie, Micah, Theo, and I watched a low-budget Christmas comedy film at home, and one of the observations that was made by the ever-astute film critics in the room was that it felt like the transitions between

¹ In fact, one of the stranger aspects to the church calendar year, especially in church traditions that don't observe regular feast days, is the fact that we often spend so much time waiting through the season of Advent only to celebrate Christ's birth and then await the beginning of Lent. We do well to observe, however, two important sections of the church calendar between Christmas day and Lent and those sections include the 12 days of Christmas (the end of which we've reached today) and the season of Epiphany that we enter now – the season where we reflect on Christ's revelation to the wider world. This season of epiphany is often observed through a focus first on the visitation of the Magi on the first Sunday of January and second through Jesus' baptism on the Sunday after.

dialogue and the scenes were extremely rushed - there was very little to no time to develop a scene or characters because the plot had to advance as quickly as possible. I feel this is something like what we experience when we read the Gospels at times. We can't be entirely blamed for this given that the Gospels really do leave out so many details that we might wonder about – oh how we wish Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John would have provided more details about all of the stories recounted in their Gospels, especially the stories from Jesus' infancy and childhood. Instead, they sometimes make it seem as though the story moves straight from Jesus' birth to his adult ministry (with a few childhood details thrown in in Luke's gospel). Maybe the Gospel writers were working on a low budget too, and as a result they needed to get down the essentials and trust the Spirit with the rest.²

But despite the fast-paced transitions in the Gospels, we do get clues as to the passage of time in between the key events mentioned. With respect to the account of the Magi in Matthew's gospel, for example, it is very likely that a fair bit of time passes between Jesus' birth and the Magi's visit, even though Matthew includes the account of the Magi right after Jesus' birth story and takes only 12 verses to tell their tale. Contrary to how our traditional nativity scenes would have us imagine, the Magi in Matthew's gospel likely did not visit Jesus right after he was born. Many scholars think that it is likely Jesus was around 2 years old, in fact, by the time the Magi came. This passage of time makes us ask different questions like: How much discussion and deliberation went on before the Magi decided to take their journey? Did they need a lot of time to

² The question of a budget for gospel writing is actually one that would be fascinating to explore more in depth. I myself am looking forward to reading a book by Candida Moss called *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible*. As the title suggests, in it she seeks to show how important enslaved Christians were to the actual processes by which the New Testament documents were produced and disseminated.

prepare and collect their treasures before heading West to where they saw the star rise? What was their plan?

Van Dyke's story of the fourth wise man's less than straightforward travel plans might also help us ask more about the Magi's travel experience and specifically where they all stopped along their journey before getting to Jesus. Again, rather than going straight to the town of Bethlehem to visit Jesus, we know from Matthew that at the very least the Magi stopped first in the city of Jerusalem. And while in Jerusalem, we also hear about *who* the magi met in their pursuit of the new king. While we don't know where exactly the Magi went first when they arrived in Jerusalem, they certainly seemed to have sought out high profile religious and political figures for advice about a newborn king because we do know that eventually King Herod got wind of these Magi and their mission. Matthew tells us that after the Magi arrived looking for information about the newborn king, news spread fast and that Herod along with "all Jerusalem"³ was *afraid* at the news of a new king. This is an interesting detail, and it is worth asking what Herod and the citizens of Jerusalem were afraid of. Given our Advent theme of "Do not be afraid," the fact that everyone was afraid suggests that perhaps the news of the new king might have been received as good for some and bad for others. I wonder what those meetings in Jerusalem were like when the Magi came to town. We certainly get a sense for some of the political goings-on in this situation: Herod holding back-door meetings to hide his desperation to hold on to power and trying to employ whoever he could in order to rid himself of rivals.

Herod would eventually approach them and essentially hire them to reveal Jesus' location, giving them the false impression, of course, that Herod wanted this information in order

³ Interestingly, the *Jewish Annotated New Testament* comments that Matthew's claim that "all Jerusalem" was afraid reflects his negative view of the city and its inhabitants. Perhaps, then, Matthew was exaggerating a bit or using hyperbole with the claim that "all Jerusalem" was afraid.

to pay Jesus homage. Matthew's Gospel says that Herod "sent them to Bethlehem." So, while the initial journey of the Magi was their own journey, they are now being employed by the King of the land. Were these Magi clueless as to the true motive of Herod? Did they sense desperation in his request? Did they hear rumours from others that the King they were seeking was thought to be a long-awaited Messiah?

What struck me as I read the story of the Magi this time around was the decision the Magi eventually had to make after Herod sent them on a reconnaissance mission and after they learned of his true intentions through the dream they had. At that point, they were faced with the choice of taking two roads: back through Jerusalem and Herod's territory – in obedience to one king who propped up the order of things as it had been, or by another road – in obedience to another king who was bringing a new order of things. The first option would probably be the safest and most familiar. Side with the powerful, obey the king of the land, and reap the benefits. The second option carried more risks. Side with the lowly and risk the wrath of the King of the land. So, as we imagine the next part of the Magi's journey as they leave Jerusalem, let's hold open their decision for a moment as we then follow them to Bethlehem.

As they approached the town, they saw the star again. Perhaps this was one of the first moments that moved them towards the decision to honour Jesus and not Herod – it was as if the universe itself – that canvas upon which these astrologers painted meaning for a living – was showing the beginnings of a new order of things. Perhaps they too, in their own way, longed for that new order since, as Matthew says, when they saw the star, they were "overwhelmed with joy." I imagine them knocking on the door and hearing some commotion inside before the door opens, with a humble, tired looking Mary and a two-year-old Jesus hanging on her leg. Did the Magi know right away that this was the place they were supposed to come, or did they look at

each other with the expression of “are we at the right place?” I imagine that it was Mary first who, despite her fatigue, sensed that these visitors were for her son, and so she invited them in. I imagine her asking them to stay seated while she prepared some food for them. Little 2-year-old Jesus, meanwhile, is doing what many two-year-olds do: he’s getting into everything. Maybe he even took note of the Magi’s belongings with interest before Mary quickly pulled him to her side.

For the Magi, this meeting is already so very different from their meeting with Herod. No whispering. No fear in the air. No secret reconnaissance missions. Just welcome and warmth. I imagine one of the wise men telling Mary about the star and what this astrological sign had meant for them – that a new king had been born. Mary begins by explaining that the practice of astrology was somewhat of a controversial practice among her people – often looked down upon but also widely practiced among people all around the Roman empire. And yet, she goes on to say, she is pretty sure she knows why the Star appeared as it did. The Magi wait with bated breath until Mary tells her story – from the angelic visit to her inspired song about God bringing down the powerful and raising up the lowly; from Joseph’s dream and his decision to stay with her to the trip to Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus, with an unexpected visit from Shepherds who shared their own story of the glory that filled the skies with good news for all people. Perhaps Mary also told the story of Jesus’ presentation in the temple and Simeon and Anna’s words of praise. Perhaps Mary gave particular emphasis to Simeon’s declaration that Jesus would be a “light for revelation to the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

At that point, I imagine Jesus, who throughout this time had been standing close to Mary, moving over to one of the Magi and touching his cloak. This Magi is overcome with emotion as he looks at Jesus. Without even thinking, he reaches beside him to draw out of his bag his gift:

Gold. He kneels on the ground in front of this two-year-old who looks at him and the gift with a curious expression. Maybe he lets out a little laughter or strings together a sentence in Aramaic with the words that he has learned to date. Each of the other Magi follow the lead of the first, and soon Jesus is treated to a spectacle of other new, exciting gifts – Frankincense and Myrrh – to explore. Mary herself is overcome with emotion too – she has a sense for the value and perhaps some of the symbolism of these items too. Maybe she knew the passage from Isaiah that said:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. 2 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. 3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn....6 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. (Isaiah 60:1-6)

Did the Magi simply leave after that to find lodging in town? Or, did they stay a while, perhaps for dinner and the night? If Mary had prepared food, maybe they stayed to eat. Maybe Joseph returned from work and joined them too. Maybe they heard about the sorrows of so many living under Roman oppression, with Herod serving as a puppet king and propping up unjust systems. Maybe at this point they started to hear Herod's mission for them to report on Jesus' location in a different light than before. Then again, he was the ruling King in the area and obeying his request would be seen as obeying the law of the land. Furthermore, they didn't have any specific reason to suspect that Herod's request was malicious – maybe he genuinely was excited for this long-awaited Messiah too. Maybe they felt a little conflicted as they settled in for the night, having been put up by Mary and Joseph. Maybe they were restless with uncertainty about what to do next. Then they fall off to sleep and have a dream – each of them, the same one. In it, they are warned not to go back on the road through Jerusalem, not to return to Herod. When they wake up, they take the warning seriously. These astrologers were accustomed to watching

for signs to direct them in their decision making and by now they had seen enough signs to reveal the right decision: they would return home by another road.

I think we too often trivialize this decision as just incurring a slight inconvenience or detour for the Magi. “No big deal – they just took a different road.” But if we imagine the full implications of their decision – disobeying the standing orders of the King of the land – we might even cast their decision as an act of civil disobedience. What if they encountered some of the King’s employ on the way home who were aware of their mission? What if he caught them trying to leave without reporting in? Perhaps they could be imprisoned or worse. The Magi were faced with the choice of two roads: back through Jerusalem and Herod’s territory – back to obedience to one king who propped up the order of things as it had been, or by another road – in obedience to another king who was bringing a new order of things. Matthew tells us that they chose to leave by another road. And as they travelled, no longer did they carry with them the gifts they had arrived with. Instead, they now carried an even more precious gift of news to the world of this new king, Jesus, whose parents had said was going to save his people from their sins and be a light of revelation to the nations. The Magi returned to their own country – which surely also had its own Herod’s. The literal road they traveled in disobedience to Herod and in obedience to God’s leading would become symbolic of the obedience to God that they would be invited to walk in their own country.

The Magi are our teachers today, for they remind us that carrying the message of Jesus to the world will often mean taking a different road than that which is prescribed by those who use power and intimidation to get their way. Later in his life, after Jesus had called his disciples and started to raise the eyebrows of the kings in power in those later years, he would teach them many wise sayings. Among them was this one:

"Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." - Matthew 7:13-14

Might we say that the Magi found that gate and walked that hard road? What are the forks in the road that are presented to us in our faith journey and what voices influence the paths we choose?

May we, like the Magi, obey the Spirit's call in choosing the narrow gate, the hard road, that leads to life. And as we walk that road, may the power of God make us strong and the light of Christ light our path. AMEN