

Matthew 2: 1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men † from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah † was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

7 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd † my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, † they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

By coincidence, last week as I was preparing my sermon, a cartoon appeared on Facebook about the three Wise Men, a cartoon that humorously raised a question that some of you might appreciate. It showed two women deep in discussion. One of them, looking seriously at the other says, “You know, I can accept the story about the virgin birth.... But I’m not sure about the story of the three men being ‘wise’?”

The American author, Rob Bell says that the best question to ask when you are reading the bible is this:

“Why did people write this down? What was going on in their world that this was important to them? Why did they feel the need to put words to this?” And then, Bell suggests, we should ask, “why did this passage endure and why is it still around, thousands of years later?” And, finally, he asks, what was there in these stories that helped the first century followers of Jesus, give voice to their pain and restore their dignity?

So, with Bell's questions in mind, I ask: why was the story of the three Wise Men recorded? How did it help to restore the dignity of the followers of Jesus in that long ago first century? And, why has the story endured through the ages to us in 2019 North Vancouver? That is my topic, this morning.

How many of you have ever visited the Arabian Desert? I haven't, but, I have travelled the Sahara Desert in Tunisia, North Africa. Those of us who have travelled in the desert will know that the horizon is absolutely endless, the sky is incredibly wide and all-embracing. Because there are no artificial lights of filament and neon, the stars are absolutely brilliant, bright, numerous, magnificent and seemingly almost within touch. When you experience the desert, you can appreciate why the ancient travelers over that ocean of sand navigated their caravans by these brilliant stars and learned to read the sky as well as we can read a Rand-McNally or BCAA or Google map.

At this time of year, we are interested in a certain group of travelers in that desert. Travelers conjured up by Matthew in that first century 2000 years ago, to provide all generations with an ancient insight to the Child who was about to be born. A Child who was for all ages, for all peoples, for all places, for all times. From north to south, from east to west, God is Emmanuel, "with us". In 2020 North Vancouver, we need to be aware that this story told so long ago, like the amazing legends of our First Nations, might not have happened quite like that. But, the story bears truth, because it is about 'Emmanuel', God with us.

Who were these prophetic figures of imagination? Who were they for Matthew, who is writing his Gospel about 70 years after the birth of Jesus. What would be their context, their origin and what would subsequent ages make of them?

The Context

The context is an old one. One of the great religions of the time was the Persian one, Zoroastrianism. There are, today, about 124,000 followers of this ancient religion, about half living in India/Pakistan. They are the followers of the prophet Zoroaster, who, legends say, lived sometime between 600 and 1500 years before Jesus. After an Islamic uprising in Persia about 700 years CE, some 1300 years ago, the Zoroastrians were persecuted, and they fled to India for their own safety. Today, most of them live in Mumbai and their religion is known as 'Parsee'. They are among the most intelligent and cultured people on Earth. They are exceedingly bright, sophisticated and generous. In fact, they reportedly give the most to charities, of any group in the world. They live what they say and preach. However, if you are thinking of joining them, you cannot, because you can only come into this religion by birth, not by conversion. That is why their numbers are small; and, like most sophisticated and well-off people, they have few children. The well-known conductor, Zubin Mehta, is a Zoroastrian.

The reason I mention the Zoroastrian religion is because Matthew says in his gospel that when Jesus was born, Wise Men came from the East to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is he who has been born the King of the Jews? We have seen his star in the East.” Now, although many translations are given - Magi, magicians, and astrologers – it is very likely that these so-called wise men were priests of the Zoroastrian religion. And one of the clues to this guess is their constant reference to the star, because it is their belief that every good person has a guiding light in the heavens that appears as a star; and the greater the person born, the brighter the star in the heavens. Now that would figure: as Zoroastrian priests, the Magi saw this bright star and knew that there was a great person who had been born somewhere. In fact, the Zoroastrians worship the god of light, Ahura Mazda, which is one of the early names for the electric light, and it was the name of a company that produced electric bulbs made from tungsten filament. We know it as the name of an automobile company – the Mazda. The reference is to the Zoroastrian god of light.

And so, one intelligent guess about Matthew’s symbol of a universal salvation, which included such gentiles as the Magi, is that as Zoroastrian priests they worshipped the god of light and believed that every great person had a bright star. In Matthew’s story no wonder they trekked across the desert in search of the one whose bright star was extraordinary.

Their number? That has varied with imagination. Sometimes the number was given as twelve Wise Men, but often the number given was six. Finally, people’s imagination worked backward and figured out that since there were three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh, this suggested three givers. Thus, our Zoroastrian priests have come down to us as the three Wise Men.

But, the imagination behind storytelling didn’t stop there. In fact, it took a clue from Matthew’s gospel by reaching back to the Hebrew bible to find words from a psalm, which were written several centuries earlier. This phrase was: “The Kings of Arabia will come bearing gifts”. The psalm associated with the Feast of the Epiphany says: “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.” This psalm was applied to the Magi and so the unnumbered priests of Zoroastrianism were turned into Three Kings. “We three Kings of Orient Are” is our musical testimony to this development.

Their Names

How about their names? In Matthew’s version, there are no names. Some would speculate that this was done on purpose and was consistent with Matthew’s story. Since mad King Herod was running all over killing anybody connected with the Christ Child, Matthew probably didn’t want to use the names of the Magi since they and their descendants would thereby be in peril of their lives. But once more, imagination could

not abide that lack for long and thus, long after wicked Herod died, names were found. In fact, the names we have today were first found in sixth-century mosaics in Ravenna, Italy, a city Joy and I visited in 2017. Does anyone remember the names? They are: Balthazar, Melchior, and Gaspar. There is a story, a later add-on, I think, about a fourth Wise-Man. Does anyone remember the name? The name is Artaban and he was of African descent.

The Gifts

Even the gifts took on symbolism. Who remembers what the gifts were? They were gold, frankincense and Myrrh. Gold symbolizes the virtue of these travelers, although some say it symbolizes 'love'. Frankincense, which is like incense going up to heaven, symbolizes that they were people of prayer, daily lifting their prayers to God. And myrrh, which is bitter, and a kind of mineral means they were willing to take on the bitterness and sacrifice necessary in their pursuit of the Holy One of Light. And, again, some say it symbolized 'hope'.

Other stories and legends clustered around these very exotic people. One legend says that when they were over a hundred years old, they met again, some 50 years later, in Armenia to attend midnight Mass, and then died shortly after. Another says they went to India where they were consecrated bishops by the Apostle, Thomas, and they died in their dioceses.

Truly, the Three Wise Men have caught our imagination, and noticeably more so than the other group in Matthew's Christmas story. And there is, I think, a powerful reason for that. That other group is the shepherds. Have you noticed that the shepherds have never really caught our imagination and that we have few stories about them? The reason probably is that, in the gospels, the shepherds are told everything. They are encountered by a very talkative angel. And this angel tells them every detail: where the Child is to be found, who is there, how to get there. When the shepherds arrive at the cave, the angel appears again to verify the place, and when the shepherds return, they are guided by a whole heavenly choir of angels singing to them along the way. So, these shepherds have no doubts, no questions, no problems, no persecutors and no mystery. They did not have to seek information. It was handed to them. They had it made.

That is not our experience. The easy-come, easy-go shepherds are not for us. They, like the sheep they tend, are followers. Our experience is more likely the struggling Magi. We, like them, are searchers. We have difficulty with the large questions of life. We are harassed by our modern Herods, who seek to destroy our children with consumerism, materialism, and greed, and, I might add, 'fake news'. We wonder about family life, AIDS, deaths from opioid overdoses, crime in the streets, rising gas prices, climate warming, illness, cancer, war, recession and death. Yes, we too would like heavenly messengers and heavenly assurances such as the shepherds got, but the fact is we

experience neither. No, no doubt about it, it is the Magi, the struggling band crossing a hot desert with only a vision and hope to guide them, that resonates with us. They are our kind of people and we will never tire of telling stories about them.

So, we will stick with them because the bottom line is that they are searchers and so are we. But they are searchers who have taught us something. They searched together and have left us the clear message that we must always do the same. We cannot search, we cannot travel, and we cannot find - alone. We need one another and that is why we are here this morning. This is why we “come to church.” Alone, we tend to become idiosyncratic, distorted and lost. We need the collective wisdom of the community. We need the collective support and prayers of our fellow pilgrims. There is more than the sum total of people here when all of us sing or say together, “Lord, have mercy on us!” and, like the Magi, search the ancient Scriptures together. We are a caravan. We are a church. We listen together. We pray together. We cry out together. We are strengthened and comforted by each other. There is no other way to travel. I think that is why this story has endured.

The Magi did not have all the answers. Neither do we. People wrote this biblical story of the Epiphany down because they found in it something that helped restore their dignity; the story helped give voice to their pain. They had a wicked King after them. In many ways so do we. But on their life travels what they did have was fellowship and the light of Christ to guide them. And, so do we. But the best part of the wondrous Magi story comes at the end: they left us a promise. For, at last, they found what they were looking for. And, so will we. That, I think, is why this story has endured.

-The Reverend Gary Hamblin

Sources: William Bausch, A World of Stories