

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY – (title and content much attributable to Rev. Kristine Ostrem) –
on the three magi – Matthew 2:1-12: January 4, 2009 A 2CB Sermon

As they enter the scene in Bethlehem, it seems almost surreal. They float above the ground, mysterious with a wisdom that runs deep, that knows things the rest of us don't. We're left starry-eyed and warm and cozy.

Legend and song simply declare that they come from afar, these regal so-called three kings of Orient who simply ARE; bearing gifts, we traverse afar, bearing gifts worthy a fellow king.

But rather than being actual kings the word used to name them sometimes refers to people who are magicians by profession. Magi – magicians the word was sometimes used to name a class of Persian priests who could have traveled on the ancient silk road, some speculate from as far away as China or Northern India. By the way, the Sundance Channel did a fascinating documentary *Jesus in India* based on the possibility that Jesus himself could have traveled to India during his so-called "lost years" sometime between the age of 13 and 33. This might explain how and why his core teachings came to have such similarity to core Buddhist and Hindu concepts. These magi could have been Northern Indian astrologers for all we know. Scraggly stargazers, absent-minded professor types, or priests with prestige and status. We just don't know. All we "know" is that, in spite of distractions and detours along the way, the magi see a star and they follow it.

What we remember from Christmas pageants, and what we first see as we breeze through the familiar story may seem more fairy tale than real life. But if we scratch even a little bit below the surface, another scene emerges, one that is not so otherworldly, and may suggest that they were as much a part of the real world as anyone.

We don't, for instance, know why the wise men stopped in Jerusalem on the way to see the baby in Bethlehem. Maybe the region's shiny capital city was just a slightly-off course tempting distraction. Or maybe their reputation for being wise was ill-founded, since they gave King Herod the information he needed to put the baby Jesus in grave danger. If they were both good and wise, in the savvy, worldly kind of sense, surely when they came into town they would have asked around a bit quietly at first. But no, not these guys. They waltz right up to Herod, current King of the Jews, to ask where the NEW King of the Jews has been born! Not such a smart idea. Granted, these guys are foreigners and might not have known Herod's reputation as a jealous, paranoid, murderous puppet of Rome. But, think about it for a minute. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that it might not be a good idea to ask the current king where his replacement has been born.

The tragedy here is that their apparently-naïve question sets Herod into protective of self and status mania, and he won't stop until he's murdered all the male children under two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

Oh, I know. The magi probably didn't intend to start such a murderous ball in motion. Not their fault. Herod's the one who called for it, and it was his henchmen who pulled it off. But the

question the magi asked wove them into the web of actions that ultimately led to those murders. By no means are their hands totally clean.

Neither are ours. We set things in motion too, for good or for evil, things we may have no clue about. Yet in some ways we bear the burden of responsibility...the things we do and don't do have consequences.

Maybe the magi were just ill-informed. But ignorance puts them not at all far from being easily-manipulated stooges. An even more cynical take on it is that the intention of the magi was not good – that they had actually decided to become Herod's spies: mercenaries maybe, kinda like Blackwater personnel in Iraq, or even secret agent provocateurs who would sneak in on the *new* king of the Jews and show fake allegiance. Herod would have been just the type to foment paranoid interventionist plans of this sort claiming 9-11-like security excuses – getting everyone afraid and paying available, mysterious wise-guy soldier-of-fortune types to do the dirty work. Much of this may seem far-fetched, given the ways we're used to thinking, but whatever the reason, having stopped off in Jerusalem and tattling to Herod as to where the baby lay was not exactly prudent!

It's sad really. The ones who should have had their eyes wide open, on the lookout for the sign, have somehow failed or forgotten to live in expectation, to see the holy light in front of them. Maybe they've become enamored with distracting positions of power and prestige. Maybe the Light is in their heads as knowledge, but hasn't made its way yet to the rest of them...As faith. Maybe they're not so good or so wise after all. At least not in the sage-like wisdom we like to clothe them in. They look a little silly there in the city. They got this far following the star, but now they can't see the star from city streets.

But the story's not over yet. Those magi leave the city, and once they are out in the outlying hills, that star appears again. I wonder if all of a sudden they felt like they were back in familiar territory, reading the sky instead of listening to kings and putting noses in books. I can almost see them shaking themselves free of whatever it was that happened back there in Jerusalem, taking deep breaths of the cold night air, and setting off again with the sign they knew from the start: a star, following it all the way to Bethlehem, to the very spot where the toddler Jesus is clinging to Mary's skirt.

And then, in this moment of meeting, when the door opens on Jesus, they get their wisdom back again...That different kind of wisdom...The kind that disappears in the harsh light of paranoid kings and corrupted religion. Their wisdom shines through again, now that they are out in the country, in wide open spaces. It's that same openness, ready to receive a message and respond to it that caused them to head out in the first place. Somehow, perhaps because of their open readiness, they recognize this poor little toddling child as Messiah. As absurd as it is in the world's eyes, they are wise enough to see with other eyes...And know...That Jesus is the one before whom to bow.

And as they bow down before Jesus and offer gifts fit for a king, do you see what I see? First it's one and then a few who have their epiphany but if we look a little closer, we can see throngs of people streaming to that little shelter in Bethlehem, people with their minds eyes wide open, their

hearts ready, their bags packed. There are people from all nations, from every corner of the earth...Ready to receive, ready to walk in the way that leads to life.

Oh, and did you notice? After the magi visited Jesus, they received another message: not from a star this time, but in a dream. They seem to live in this dreamy open place now all the time, waking or sleeping. This dream warned them not to go back to Jerusalem. They pay attention this time. They go home by another way.

They went home another way. Leaving behind the collusion with paranoid, murderous, self-preserving powers. Committing civil disobedience in relation to Herod, in order to obey a higher law – that which is of God. Moving into a whole new way of being along a whole new path because they have met Jesus...And they will never be the same again.

In 2009, let's go where WE can meet Jesus – again, maybe really for the first time: open eyes, hearts ready, and like the magi, let us go home by a whole other way too.