
Wizard Wisdom

Matthew 2:1-12

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on January 5, 2014 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

I suspect many of you have heard of the teen-aged wizard, Harry Potter, who leapt off the pages of J. K. Rowling's enormously popular series of books into reader's hearts...and into movie theaters, and theme parks, and myriad other places too. I'm a fan of Harry Potter. Enough of a fan to have waited in line at midnight at the Regulator Bookstore just down the road for more than one book release. Enough of a fan to have traveled to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme park in Orlando, Florida with two of my best friends. Enough of a fan to have visited the Warner Brothers Harry Potter Studios in London when I traveled there a couple of summers ago with those same friends. I have found the Harry Potter series to be wonderful—an imaginative world, filled with provocative reflections on the nature of good and evil, and a strong endorsement of the beauty of friendship and the merits of sacrifice.

In this scientific day and age, the notion of magic is generally seen as pure fiction...the stuff of make-believe and movies. In the ancient world, however, when the workings of the universe were a profound mystery, the practice of magic or sorcery may have created fear or suspicion, but few doubted it was *real*. It was understood that there *were* people who through their unique understanding of the universe could put the universe under their control through spells, healings, or predicting the future. For Jews, there was likely concern that magic was unnatural and challenged the order of God's good creation, and in some cases people may have worried that magicians were obedient to a more sinister power. And certainly, people who practiced magic could create a great deal of fear. It is this kind of fear that spurred witch-hunts in Europe and the Salem Witch Trials in our country back in the 1690s. So, what we now tend to enjoy as magical and whimsical and harmless fantasy was once far more mysterious, shrouded in fear and very real danger.

We think of the visitors to Jesus as being *kings* or *wise* men. That is how the tradition has domesticated them and handed them down to us. But the word in the Greek for wise men is *magoi* (see, our word *magi!*), which goes back to the word *magos*...which is where we get the word "magician" or "sorcerer"...these were men known for their abilities in reading the stars and understanding the signs of the times.¹ It was said that wise kings wanted wise men like the magi as counselors to their kingdom. These magicians were understood as an almost priestly class. They were highly sought after for their astrological skill. At the time when the biblical story of Jesus' birth was written, the ancient magicians were mysterious foreigners; very different from what the Jews and Romans were used to; exotic outsiders from far away places. But God often speaks to us through the stranger, so I want to focus on three lessons we can learn from these wise wizards of the ancient east.

One lesson we learn in this passage is that the wise men took quite a journey to find the infant Jesus. We don't get many details on the journey, but since we know they were traveling from the East we can imagine it was a relatively long journey through pretty fierce landscapes. A few years ago I had the opportunity to travel extensively through the Middle East, and in my travels I found the landscape to be pretty brutal. The desert would alternate between extreme heat and cold, and the wind could whip the sand up and it would sting, not just your eyes, but your whole body with the tiny grains blasting against your skin. In one town, Palmyra, Syria, we found carvings near an ancient temple from before the time of Christ or Mohammad...and it showed three women who were entirely shrouded in cloth. Modesty aside, covering your body and your face with cloth *protects you* from the harsh stinging sand in the midst of thrashing desert winds.

Later we travelled to the base of Mt Sinai and stood at the traditional site of the burning bush. I remember looking around the landscape that was as rocky and treacherous as it was flat and dry and thinking to myself, "the miracle isn't that there was a bush that was *burning*...the miracle is that there was *a bush here at all!*" This

¹ Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary on Matthew, Ben Witherington III, p. 55.

was not friendly land, rich and green, flowing with milk and honey. It was barren and broken land. These magicians set out from their home in the East on a long and difficult journey, gazing at the starlit sky, in a place that held far more signs of danger than signs of life. They weren't exactly sure what the heavens were telling them, but they were determined to follow their intuition and the heavenly star in search of this special Jewish child. Surely this whole journey must have seemed strange for them too.

Have any of you ever felt like the wise men? Have you ever felt you're on a strange journey...perhaps finding yourself in the midst of a desert wilderness? Do you know what it's like to search for God...to search with heart and mind and soul? Have you sometimes wondered just how much further you have to travel - how far away or how near God is to your reach? Sometimes it may even feel like the winds of life are whipping up a storm just like in the desert, stinging all the vulnerable and exposed parts that you're trying to protect. It may feel like for all you're looking up to heaven, you just don't know how to finally grab hold of God. You may wonder if God is there at all, and if he's searching for you too.

These desert wizards remind us that the journey to God is not always an easy one. Sometimes the journey to God involves wandering through fierce landscapes. When we find ourselves in the midst of a barren and rocky terrain, the wise men whisper across the centuries to us and say, "keep your eyes on heaven."

All their star-gazing took the wizards a good distance, all the way to Jerusalem...but then they got stuck. I've joked before that the main reason these men have gone down in history as *wise* men is because these men, when they were lost, were wise enough to *ask for directions!* "Where is this child? The one they call king of the Jews? Where can we find him?" All the religious scholars and theologians of the day point the magicians to Bethlehem, where they finally discover young Jesus.

And so the wise men whisper to us too, "learn to ask for help if you find yourself lost. Seek out a trusted mentor or pastor or friend...find those blossoms in the desert who can guide you to God. Find the companions who can accompany you on the journey, even when the journey is difficult and hard to understand."

A second lesson we can learn from the wise men is how they respond when they finally discover Jesus. They respond with joy. This is in marked contrast to Herod's response earlier in the passage. When king Herod heard that there were magicians from the east asking about Jesus, scripture tells us that Herod was frightened (that's bible-talk for pretty much freaking out!) His response was to order that all children under the age of 2 be killed...so basically, all of Jerusalem was afraid too. People were terrified that these strangers from another land were asking about a Jewish king, because this was creating political upheaval with tragic consequences.

But the magi...scripture says they were *overwhelmed with joy*. Their journey had finally found its end. They were not *frightened* of this small child, they embrace him. Can you almost envision them laughing with and hugging each other in joy when they finally found their way to this humble family? Perhaps it is only later that they are moved to their knees in silence (as many of the nativity scenes depict them). These strange travelers recognize what no one else around seems yet to realize. This is not just any baby, *but a king*. And not just any king, but a king who will transform and redeem and heal the weary world. The wise wizards teach us that the weary world should *rejoice* at the kingdom to come. Be not afraid; be overwhelmed with joy. And in your joy give gifts, even, as the wise men gave ...frankincense, gold, and myrrh to Jesus.

Ultimately, the joy we receive at Christmas is the incarnation...God's gift of himself, the word made flesh, dwelling in our midst. In giving each other gifts at Christmas we try to capture the joy of God's ultimate gift to us. But at the end of these 12 days of Christmas, our celebration of Epiphany and the magi's gifts to Jesus can push us to reflect on what gifts *we can bring to God*. This is the question that the magi whisper to us. "What is it that God may be calling you to give?"

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Epiphany falls so near the new year, when each of us are taking stock, reflecting on the past, making resolutions for the year-to-come. What resolution might you make that is related to your discipleship? I think sometimes it can be easy to be overwhelmed by God-sized goals. But sometimes it is just an issue of taking one small step. It could be as simple as volunteering to serve lasagnas to the folks at Urban Ministries of Durham with the Congregation...perhaps you attend a prayer vigil with

the Religious Coalition for a non-violent Durham...maybe you decide to volunteer with the youth group or to go on one Habitat build...perhaps you commit to sponsoring a child through Compassion International, or to make a regular pledge to the church each month. The wise magicians challenge us with the question, "what gifts might you bring to Christ? Where is your fear holding you back?"

A third lesson we can learn from the wise men is how our meeting Jesus can set us on an altogether different path. After encountering Jesus, the wise man *go home by another way*. King Herod was known for his cruel empire. When he heard that astrologers from the east were looking for a Jewish King, Herod sought to trick the magi...if he could get them to tell him where to find this child, under the guise that he too wanted to worship this young king, Herod would have direct access to Jesus. This was back in the olden days before Twitter and cell phones and instant access...Jesus wasn't checking into his location via Foursquare, nor was Mary posting about their travels with photos on Facebook. So Herod calls the astrologers secretly, trying to get as much information as possible as to how on earth to find this child. It is political scheming at its best! Herod presumably expected to hear back from these foreign astrologers. But after the magi lingered with the baby Jesus for a while and gave him their gifts, they were warned in a dream about Herod. And they took the dream seriously. And returned home by another road. Their loyalty was not to the king of the region, but to the small child they'd just left. And rather than be tempted by power and riches of a foreign leader, the men left their riches at Jesus' feet and returned home by another way, avoiding Herod altogether.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you just aren't sure what to do, or where to go, or in whom you should place your trust and loyalty? The magi are whispering these words to us too: "it's okay to make mistakes." If you realize you're listening to the wrong people or the wrong powers, you have the freedom to take a different route. If you are in a place right now of competing voices, facing an uncertain future, and unsure of what to do, the wise men tell us that it is okay to linger with Jesus until the route becomes clear. And take courage if your lingering with Jesus sends you on an altogether different road.

So, to review, here are the three stages of wizard wisdom:

1. If you find yourself in a long and difficult journey to discover God, persevere with the wise men through sand and desert, rocks and extremes...ask for directions if you get lost...because God shows up in the strangest of places... like a desert journey, a humble manger, and a small human child.
2. When you find God, do not be afraid...but discover the joy of dwelling in God's midst, and ask yourself "what gifts might I bring to God's kingdom?"
3. If you're in a place of confusion and unsure where to go or who to listen to, don't be afraid to take the road less traveled, away from the all the false expectations and projections and designs of this world.

These magical visitors to Jesus, whatever name you call them: kings, wizards, astrologers, star-gazers, sorcerers, Harry Potter, or wise men...they leave us with lessons that carry across not only deserts, but across time and culture and generations. They were not God's insiders...they were travelers from an entirely different culture. Yet they have revealed to us something about the nature of our God, and something that God's insiders were slow to see. So as we move into the new year, take note of the visitors; the strange people who show up in your life and point to the promise of a kingdom that you have not yet experienced. Maybe you will learn something new, maybe you will simply find some beautiful new star to gaze at in wonder, or maybe, just maybe you may even encounter God.