

“ANOTHER ROAD: THE JOURNEY OF THE MAGI”

Matthew 2:1-12
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No Caspar, Balthazar, or Melchior. No mention of camels. From Matthew's account, we cannot assume that there were only three of them. We cannot assume that they traveled a long way to arrive at Bethlehem, that they were kings, or that they represented different nations. Magi from the East turned up in Jerusalem to ask Herod about the child born to be the next king of the Jews based on the rising of a star.

Much of what we have come to love about this story are the embellishments of a tradition that grew up over the next millennium or so. What we seem to know from the text leads many scholars to question the historicity of the event. We have lots of astronomical observations recorded from the time and region where our story takes place. Why do none of them mention the sudden appearance of a bright star? Volumes have been written trying to identify it, but nearly all of them look to the appearance of a comet or the conjunction of planets to account for it. Our carols ascribe all kinds of meaning to the gifts, but the text offers no explanation or even implies that there is any symbolism to them. We imagine a long and hazardous journey, perhaps because of their late arrival. Mary and Joseph have moved into better living quarters and the Greek word describes Jesus as a toddler.

The long journey, the star, and the gifts are the most attractive elements in the story for preachers, but this morning I'll be focusing on the journey home, the other road to their own country. We chose this focus some months ago when we adopted the journey theme for our Advent and Christmas seasons.

I began to question the wisdom of this choice early last week when I realized that the only thing I had to say about this was that the magi took an alternate route to avoid meeting up with Herod. They are warned in a dream which could be interesting, but I talked about dreams with Joseph. And quite honestly, Joseph's dreams were far more interesting. Angels are fun to talk about, but no angel appears in the dreams of the magi.

They just had a dream telling them something they should have already known. These are supposed to be smart guys. They go to the palace thinking the newborn king of the Jews will be the child of the current king. There's a certain logic to that. But when you learn that the current king isn't actually the father, and you know that he has recently murdered two brothers with aspirations for the crown, it shouldn't take much to realize that Herod doesn't want to worship the newborn, he wants to kill him. In this case, the dream isn't likely to be something supernatural. They saw Mary and the child, delivered the presents, settled in for a good night's sleep, and wake up knowing that Herod isn't going to be overjoyed to see this particular mother and child. We experience revelations like this overnight all the time. There's not really a point worthy of an "amen" in all of this.

Well, I'm not despairing yet, because I still have my original idea. I can still talk about this "other road" as a metaphor for the change that happens within the magi upon meeting the Christ child. They go home another way. They go home as another people, changed persons. So what was different about them? What's the spiritual journey they take as they return home? Well... we don't know... do we? We don't know who they were, where they came from, or what their faith was. These are gaps in Matthew's story. This is one of the reasons that the church began to shape a tradition that filled out our picture. We began to see them as coming from the ends of the earth, representing different peoples, different ages. We gave them names and began to call them kings. And so they came to represent the universality of the Christ for all people. But none of that is in the text. It could all be made up.

Who were these wise men? Dwight Longenecker, a pastor, spent several years researching this question, and published a book on his findings called *Mystery of the Magi: The Quest to Identify the Three Wise Men*. He acknowledges that he is not a scholar and that his conclusions remain speculative, but they are more consistent with the text of Matthew and the historical context of the time than what the tradition has left us.

For example, the tradition tells us that the wise men were Persian astrologers who came from Babylon and areas further east of there. The trouble with this is that every other biblical text describes that area as the North. But if you travel due east and just a little south of Jerusalem on the other side of the Dead Sea, you come to the Nabataean Kingdom, a 3-5 day journey by horse.

This kingdom had a long and mixed history with Judea. At the time of Jesus' birth, the political circumstances were in flux. Herod was in the good graces of Rome. The Nabataeans were not, but were moving in that direction. To get there, they needed to patch up their relationship with Herod. Longenecker proposes that when the magi, who would have been astrologers saw the signs in the skies that a royal child had been born in Judea, the king would have sent the magi as emissaries offering gifts in celebration of the birth. They would naturally have gone to Jerusalem. But when circumstances took them to Bethlehem and they realized that Herod would not be celebrating this birth, they must also have realized that their mission had failed and that their own king would also not be happy.

There's a lot more in the book, but this piece seemed appropriate for my purposes today. It may or may not be historically accurate, though I think he makes a pretty case. But if it's true, the magi wouldn't have returned to the royal court. They would have returned to a different part of the kingdom. They would have been refugees. Longenecker speculates that they went to Damascus where they may have encountered the Essenes and eventually become part of the Christian community in Arabia that nurtured Paul after his conversion.

None of this might be true, but it tells a credible story of how the encounter with Jesus might have changed the magi. The journey to Bethlehem was probably very different than the journey from Bethlehem. They cannot have expected to encounter what they did, a

child born in humble circumstances who would change the world, who would upset political and religious structures.

This is what Jesus sometimes does to us as well. We come to the manger moved and joyful. We see in the manger the love of God made flesh. But when we return to our homes, to our lives, and we walk with Jesus, the love of God begins to look more difficult. The babe in the manger will grow up and tell us to love our enemies. The infant admired will become the one, as Isaiah put it, despised by people. The world doesn't look the same after we've seen Jesus. It can't have looked the same to the magi either. We don't know what that other road looked like to the magi, but it was every bit as important as the journey to Bethlehem.

So too, our journey to Bethlehem holds a special place in our hearts. We should never forget when we first looked into the manger. But this other road, the one we walk today, matters just as much. It matters to you, and it matters to your neighbor whom Jesus calls you to love. It matters to the world struggling to find the path of peace, the way of shalom. It matters to creation which needs our help if it is to heal fully.

A child has been born to us. We can't keep traveling the same paths. We need to find the other road, the one that refuses to let the Herods of the world have their way. Choose the road that leads to life and to love. That's the road that the infant will learn to walk. It's the road that the crucified and risen Christ would have us walk too. Amen.