

“Not All Who Wander... Wonder”

January 5, 2014

Matthew 2:1-12

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 2 "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: 6 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; 8 and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; 11 and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This Sunday marks Epiphany Sunday. Traditionally the Twelve Days of Christmas goes from Christmas day to January 6th, the day of Epiphany when we celebrate the Magi's visit. The Sunday that falls between January 2nd and January 8th is traditionally observed as Epiphany Sunday in most denominations who follow the liturgical calendar. We as Disciples of Christ typically try to follow the liturgical calendar and so celebrate Epiphany only a couple short weeks after Christmas each year. As in our Scripture the Magi's visit is sometime after the birth of Christ, it is not all wrapped up into our Manger scene as many sets would have you believe. Those are artistic interpretations of two separate events: the adoration of the Shepherds and the adoration of the Magi, put into one package for our convenience, a beautiful manger scene.

The event however of the Magi's adoration is, according to some biblical scholars, anytime within the first couple of years of Christ's life because of Herod's command in Matthew 2:16-18 that follows this section of scripture to kill all infant boys up to two years. Matthew does not truly give us a time frame from the time of Jesus' birth to the moment of the Magi's visit outside of the information that it was at home, we can only guess that it was within the very early years of Jesus' life.

Magi, is a term we are familiar with, we also know them interchangeably as wise men and kings. And while we traditionally assume due to the number of gifts noted in Matthew that there were only three of them we have no historical evidence, only an assumption. We even have names for them and where these 'kings' originated from: Melchior of Persia; Caspar of India; and finally Balthazar of Arabia. They also in traditionally Christian practices have come to represent three differing age groups, cultural, geographical and other various representations. If we pull out almost any Nativity set we will see these things depicted. One is old, one is middle-aged, and one is young. Often representing the various stages of life the ages are set somewhere around the 20's, the 40's, and the 60's. We also see the different ethnicities of these individuals, they are to be quite honest, not often depicted as white men, but rather their skin is representative of the cultures they are supposed to represent.

However we know them we tend to quietly gloss over a couple of details about the Magi. Magi was a term that refers to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, a branch of religion that has quietly faded into the dust of history. As part of their faith understanding they studied the stars and had a reputation for astrology. This makes a lot of sense to us today, that those who studied the stars would quest after a particular star, now known to us as the Star of Bethlehem. Historically we know they traveled a long way, the wandered over many different terrains and lands following after the particular star that would lead them to what...?

While we know what being Jesus, they did not truly know, they followed this star that had risen because they believed in the prophetic voices that came from the prophets of old. They also followed this star because they had a trust in their faith that they would find the person they sought. You see the rising of a star was of great significance to the ancients it was in many different cultures understood to herald a new King's birth. This is why the Magi were respected, as they studied the skies they gained a profound knowledge of what was to come in accordance to the skies. Remember too that the stars particularly for the Judaic people have always been held significant since God's promise to Abraham was to afford him descendants that surpassed the number of stars in the sky. This probably a large part of why Herod, the current King, was so very frightened when the Magi visited, the Magi were purveyors of great knowledge and wisdom and were highly respected as authorities of what was then or what was next. It would be frightening to have someone come in and tell you that your successor had been born and you did not know it. Kind of like passing your replacement as you head into your boss's office to be told you had been replaced. Not necessarily a fun position for anyone to be in. Yet, the Magi continued on and found Jesus, knelt before him, paid him homage, and gave him three gifts: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. Then after a warning sent to them in a dream they left for home another way.

My sermon today is entitled "Not all who Wander...Wonder". We traditionally view these Magi as nomadic wanderers without much direction or purpose outside of following a Star. We know this is just a bit of artistic license to fit neatly within the boxes of art and music. We can not deny that they wandered but we can pretty much debunk that they wondered at all what they were wandering towards.

I have to ask though in our own wanderings do we wander in assurance or do we wonder if we are heading in the right direction? A wise person once asked this of me, and perhaps it might make it to our sign outside, but I was asked "are you mature enough in your faith to ask questions...?" This sincerely got me thinking about what my own response would be but I also have to add to this particular question..."and are you mature enough to handle the answers?"

You see as Christians we throughout our faith lives wonder and wander a lot. We are blessed that in our particular denomination, you know the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) we are not only allowed but actually encouraged to ask questions and wander through the difficult and sometimes befuddling aspects of our faith, denomination, and theological understanding. It is through this sort of wandering that we are offered a chance at Epiphany, a chance at seeing the manifestation of God in new ways and new understandings.

I ask that you watch this short clip from Lord of the Rings.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bN5cmDWDydg>

The line from the book and this poem entitled "All That is Gold Does Not Glitter" taken from the Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien that has always struck me is "Not all who wander are lost".

Sometimes we have to in our faith wander, but we wander with purpose as the Magi wandered to follow the Star, we wander with purpose to find Epiphany, to find our God, to find the manifestation of God in our world, we wander in order to find Christ. Amen.