

“Following in Faith”

“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.”

During their retirement years, my parents enjoyed taking bus trips with their friends in the North Plainfield Senior Citizens Club. Some of these were day trips to local museums, dinner theatres, and other local attractions (including the Radio City Christmas Spectacular in New York City); others would last for several days and even weeks. Most of the time, they had a clear itinerary of their trips: when they would leave, the places they would visit, hotels where they would spend the night, and when they would return home. But on occasion, they would go on “mystery trips,” in which the destination was not revealed until the bus arrived at the unknown location. My parents enjoyed the adventure of getting on a bus, not knowing where it would be taking them – but frankly, the mere thought of this would make me very nervous, because I always want to know where I’m going when I leave for a trip. Our recent journey to Jonah’s ordination in New Brunswick is a good example of how I need to have every detail of a trip planned out in advance: before we left home, I had reservations at hotels for every night of the trip, and had plotted our route and entered all of the destinations into my GPS. I want to know where we are going, how we are going to get there, and where we are going to stay once we arrive. I want no part of any “mystery trip.”

So I probably wouldn’t have made a good Magi, because they were more than willing to embark on such a mysterious journey. The “wise men from the East” play a critical role in the Christmas story, and they have an honored place in our nativity scenes and Christmas pageants. We know very little about them – in fact, Matthew doesn’t even give us their names or the number that made the trip to Bethlehem (tradition has set the number at three and given them names: Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior). They were not kings but Magi (*magoi*), a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, engaging in such practices as astrology and the interpretation of dreams. They represent Gentiles who, though they do not have the special revelation of the Torah, come to Jerusalem following the light they have seen. Pagan beliefs associated the birth of a new ruler with astral phenomena, and Jewish tradition related the hope of the Messiah to the “star out of Jacob” (Numbers 24:17). Having seen an unusual “star at its rising,” the Magi embark on a journey whose destination is unknown; they *“follow the star wherever it went”* until it leads them to Jerusalem and the palace of Herod the Great. Still not knowing if they have reached their unknown destination, the Magi ask directions from the one who illegitimately occupies the throne of Israel: *“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.”* (Matthew 2:2).

Herod’s response is at first perplexing to the reader who is unaware of his background: *“When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him”* (2:3); but when we learn more about him we can understand why the question of these visitors from the East fills him with such fear. Herod the Great was not a Jew but an Idumean who, back by Rome, had established himself as king by military conquest of his “own” people. The populace, who wanted a king with Jewish blood who was a descendant of David (*“Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established forever.”* – 2 Samuel 7:16) and who was not beholden to the Romans, resented his rule. Herod lived in constant fear that his claim to the throne could be taken away at any time and would go to any lengths to maintain his illegitimate grasp on royal power; he even killed three of his own

sons who he considered a threat. So when he hears these foreign visitors inquire about the “king of the Jews,” Herod fears that if the legitimate king has been born that his days are numbered. It is not surprising that *“the news the wise men brought him as a pretender to the throne must have alarmed him. It was clear from his character that he would stop at nothing.”* (Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI).

Herod calls together *“all the chief priests and the scribes of the people,”* the religious leaders of his time, to ascertain *“where the Messiah was to be born”* (2:4). They respond by quoted the prophecies that identified Bethlehem as the place where God’s anointed one would be born:

- “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.” – Micah 5:2.
- “The LORD said to you: It is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.” – 2 Samuel 5:2.

By adding these texts from Jewish Scripture, Matthew pictures the quest of the Magi as being guided not only by pagan astrology but also by the Word of God; *“the story of the Magi and the star becomes for Matthew the anticipation of the fate of the good news of salvation ... the Christological good news draws believers, and those believers, the Magi, are Gentiles.”* (Raymond Brown).

After learning about the significance of Bethlehem from his religious leaders, Herod calls the Magi secretly so that he might learn *“from them the exact time when the star had appeared”* (2:7), and then instructs them to go to Bethlehem 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.”* (2:8). Herod claims that he also wants to worship the newborn King, but his true intentions are to kill the child and eliminate the threat the legitimate king would pose to his illegitimate rule.

- “In the twofold reaction to this combined proclamation by the star and the Scripture, the wise men of the Gentiles accept and pay homage; but the ruler of Jerusalem and all the chief priests and scribes of the people do not believe. Rather, they conspire against the King of the Jews and seek to put him to death.” – Brown.

The Magi continue their journey, obediently following *“the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.”* (2:9). When they see that the star has stopped *“right over the place where Jesus lay,”* they know that their mystery trip has reached its destination, and *“they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”* (2:10). The Magi respond with *“the joy of one whose heart has received a ray of God’s light and who can now see that his hope has been realized – the joy of one who has found what he sought, and has himself been found.”* (Ratzinger). When they enter the house over which the star had stopped, the Magi *“saw the child with Mary his mother”* (2:11), in a setting which was a stark contrast to what they found when they visited Herod in Jerusalem. Instead of a palatial palace, the child they sought was in humble surroundings; yet the wise men know that the true King is not to be found where one might expect, for God’s ways are not the same as human ways and God’s Will does not conform to human expectations.

- “The babe is lying in a manger; there is hardly a drink of water. Can this really be a king’s abode? But the saintly men are not misled. Heedless of the poverty and wretchedness, they fall down before the babe and worship him, and open they treasures and present them to him... Christ,

our true king, was outwardly utterly poor, wretched, despised, and cast away; yet he was inwardly utterly filled with joy, comfort, and courage.” – Martin Luther.

There is no evidence that the Magi every paid homage to King Herod; but when they come into the presence of Mary and her child, *“they knelt down and paid him homage,”* recognizing that they had come into the presence of the true King. The gifts that they had brought with them on their journey were not presented to Herod in his opulent palace; but in the humble surrounds in which Jesus was found, they opened *“their treasure chests [and] offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh,”* gifts that were appropriate for royalty.

- “The wise men do a *proskynesis* before the royal child, that is to say that they throw themselves onto the ground before him. This is the homage that is offered to a divine king. The gifts brought by the wise men may be explained in similar terms. They are not practical gifts, of a kind that the holy family might have had a use for at this moment. They express the same thing as the *proskynesis*: they acknowledge the royal dignity of him to whom they are offered.” – Ratzinger.

The Magi have reached their destination, which is no longer a “mystery trip” but one that has led them to the child who has been born to be the Savior of all people, so that we might continue to rejoice as we sing *“joy to the world, the Lord is come.”* Once they have paid homage to the newborn King and bestowed gifts befitting royalty upon him, the time has come for them to return home; but instead of displaying the obedience that has marked their behavior in the story to this point, the Magi deliberately disobey Herod’s command that they *“bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”* Instead, *“having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”* (2:12). The one who led them into the presence of Christ the newborn king will continue to lead and guide them so that they might be led *“in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* (Psalm 23:3).

- “The wise men from the east are a new beginning. They represent the journeying of humanity toward Christ. They initiate a procession that continues throughout history. Not only do they represent the people who have found the way to Christ: they represent the inner aspiration of the human spirit, the dynamism of religions and human reason toward him.” – Ratzinger.

The “mystery trip” of the Magi is an example of the call to discipleship in which our Lord invites us to “follow me” in paths whose destination is not always clear and may be filled with unexpected encounters and experiences. It is a call to follow in faith like Abraham, who *“by faith obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.”* (Hebrews 11:8). It is a call to walk in the footsteps of the first disciples who left everything behind to accept Jesus’ invitation to *“follow me, and I will make you fish for people”* (Matthew 4:19). It is a call to follow our Lord in the way of the Cross, which may mean that one day *“you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”* (John 21:18). It is a call that will often send a disciple of Christ across borders and over walls that had stood for generations, standing among people who one had formerly shunned, because *“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (Acts 10:34). As the Magi followed the star in faith that it would lead them into the presence of the Christ Child, we also follow in faith knowing that God will lead us and guide us in new and unexpected ways so that we might bear the gift of Christ’s love into every corner of the world.

- “Discipleship of the crucified Christ is characterized by a faith that drives its adherents into the world with a restlessness and a daring they could not manage on the basis of human volition alone ... It could be said of the theology of the cross, in fact, that its chief end is the genesis of a community impelled (pushed!) toward the world despite its own resistance and reluctance.” – Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context*.
- “God is pushing me – he drives me on, rather than leading. I cannot control my own life. I long to be quiet but am driven into the middle of the storm.” – Martin Luther, 1519.

I still want no part of any “mystery trips” that lack any details of what is awaiting me on a journey; but throughout my life, the call to ministry has led me in directions that I had not planned nor often had desired. The call to discipleship is to follow in faith, trusting that God will lead us on paths that may not be easy or pleasant, to destinations that may not be of our own choosing, but which will allow us to be the “earthen vessels” that will bear the treasure of God’s Word to others. As the Magi followed the star in faith that would bring them into the presence of the Christ Child, may we as the bearers of that good news continue to follow our Lord in faith, not knowing where we are going, but knowing that God is leading the way along whatever roads we may travel, the way that leads to our eternal home in the knowledge that *“surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”* (Psalm 23:6).

Amen.