

**Rev. Phil Blackwell • Sunday, January 3, 2016**  
**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

# From Near and Far



**First United  
Methodist Church**

**DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD**

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We began to tell the Christmas story on December 20<sup>th</sup> when we heard the angel Gabriel announce to Mary that she would give birth to God's child and marveled at her gracious and prophetic response, what we call "The Magnificat." On Christmas Eve we focused our attention on the crèche, Mary and Joseph kneeling beside the baby Jesus, we heard the angels sing, and we saw the local shepherds come to the stable. Last Sunday our pastor, Tina Lang, returning to the exclamation so dear to our ears, "Hail, Mary, full of grace," "Ave Maria," showed Mary clothed in compassion and gentleness that outstripped the enemies of love. Today we get to the final chapter of the story when the visitors from afar, the magi, having followed the star to Jerusalem, get redirected by the scripture to Bethlehem, a place they had not expected to go, to find a king they had not expected to see.

The shepherds, the locals coming down from the hills around Bethlehem at the invitation of the angels, the magi, the foreigners coming from lands to the east at the direction of the star . . . they come from near and far to adore the infant Jesus.

Herding sheep was a nasty job back in those days; it might still be as there are Bedouin shepherds out on the same hillsides today. Living outside with the sheep day and night, trying to find them pasture where almost nothing grows, willing to tread covertly on another person's land, trying not to draw attention to oneself. At night there is the challenge of protecting the flock from intruders and wild animals.

We have to imagine that they carried the odor of their work with them. All of them crowding into the stable at night might have been a challenge to Mary and Joseph's sensibilities. And the angels must have wondered why God had sent them to waste their loveliest choruses on such a rustic audience.

When Jesus calls himself "the good shepherd" he is not adopting an idyllic "persona"; rather, he is claiming his devotion to us . . . feeding us in green pastures, leading us to lagoons of drinking water, sleeping across the opening of the sheep fold to keep us in and thieves out.

And as for him calling us his "sheep" . . . it may not be a positive image. Imagine driving across the Scottish Highlands on a single-track road, only with a bulge every few miles to pass an oncoming car, a road looking like a snake having just swallowed a rodent. And up ahead is a single sheep standing beside the road; he has been standing there all day without a single car passing by. But as we approach, the sheep, in his sheepish wisdom, decides, "I think I will cross to the other side," and we screech our brakes in self-preservation. Being called "sheep" is not an unalloyed compliment.

But, there they are in the stable on that night in that tiny village, the shepherds and the sheep coming down from the nearby hills to pay homage to Jesus, the child of God.

Now, for the rest of the world, for the magi represent all the world far beyond the friendly confines of Bethlehem. "Magi," who are they? The Greek New Testament uses that term, but the text does not make clear what is a proper translation. "Kings"? "Wise men"? "Magicians"? Madeleine L'Engle, in her beautiful children's book on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus entitled The Glorious Impossible, depicts the magi as "astronomers/astrologers," before those two disciplines were separated. They studied the stars and drew conclusions about human experience from them. In that sense, today we might call them "professors." By the Second Century it was agreed upon that they were kings.

Whoever they are, here they come. From where? We only know that it is from "afar." From Sheba? From Saba? From Persia? The traditional filling-in-the-gaps-in-the-story has them coming from three different countries, maybe meeting at the oasis somewhere along the Silk Road, and traveling together, having at least the star in common.

How many magi are there? The Bible does not say, only that there are three gifts. Maybe if they are professors, on modest salaries and praying for tenure, twelve of them might have gone together to buy three gifts. There is artwork in one of the catacombs which shows only two magi. Other catacomb art shows four. By the time we get to the Middle Ages there are lists claiming there to be twelve magi, all of them with names.

Names . . . in our Western tradition we have learned them to be Balthasar, Melchoir, and Gaspar and which gift each one presents. In the Ethiopian tradition the magi are known as Hor, king of the Persians, Basanater, king of Saba, and Karsudan, king of the East. And to complete the work of early Christian imagination, there is a calendar of saints on display in Cologne where the obituaries are given. All three wise men died in 54 A.D. within days of each other at Sebaste in Armenia – Melchoir on January 1<sup>st</sup> at 116, Balthasar on January 6<sup>th</sup> at 112, and Gaspar on January 11<sup>th</sup> at 109.

This is all fascinating, I suggest, because none of it is in the Bible. It is what the renowned New Testament scholar, Raymond Brown, calls “Christian midrash.” It is “the popular and imaginative exposition of the Scriptures for faith and piety.” (The Birth of the Messiah, p.198-199) All of this is to say that there are these foreign characters from afar who come to Jesus via Herod’s palace in Jerusalem, and we know very little about them.

Let us stop at the palace with them for a minute. They have done all of their research. They know that the star in the western sky (remember that they are traveling from east to west) signals the advent of a newborn king of the Jews. It is their regal responsibility to come and honor him. But why did they go to the ruler’s household in Jerusalem instead of going straight to the stable in Bethlehem? Because they were following the wrong prophetic scripture. They were looking at Isaiah 60 where the call is, “Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the Lord’s glory has shone upon you.” These are the prophet’s words to the people of God living in exile 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Jerusalem was lying in ruins; the walls were breached; the towers destroyed; the temple a heap of rubble. And here comes God’s promise in the vision of Isaiah that all will be restored even better than before. The city will be rebuilt; the power to rule will be returned to the historic elite; the whole economy of the region again will center on Jerusalem where everyone will come with their gifts and goods, even from Sheba, “carrying gold and incense.”

Well, Herod does not know the Hebrew texts, and he is shocked by the news these alien travelers tell him that a new king has been born, a direct threat to Herod’s rule. So, he quickly convenes his scriptural experts, “Where is this savior to be born?” And the experts, bless them for knowing the texts, turn to Micah 5:2-4:

“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 . . . And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”

The savior of the world will come from Bethlehem, the rural village, not Jerusalem, the urban center. And he will be more like a shepherd than a king. And his love will bring security and peace; his power will not depend on prosperity and dominance. There is no going back to the way it was, as promised by Isaiah. There will be no “new and improved” Jerusalem where the elite become even more elitist.

No, in the mind of Micah here is a peasant hope for the future, that all will be attentive to the well-being of all. The goal of God’s good gift is not political triumph but human flourishing, not well-being for a few at the cost to the many, but the well-being of all, even of the elite who will not know how well off they are until they see Jesus’ love in action. (The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann, p.192)

The magi divert their course nine miles to the south, find the stable, offer their gifts, bow before Jesus, and head home by another route. Certainly, they want to avoid being tracked by Herod's henchmen. The last thing they want to do is go back to the palace and tell Herod what they found. It might literally be the last thing they do. No, their path is different because of Jesus.

Now, some have read into the different way home that they converted from whatever they were to whatever following Jesus would make them out to be. That is possible, though the Bible does not say so. It is another example of endearing Christian midrash. But we can assume that on their way home they must have wondered, "How could we have been so wrong? The wrong text, the wrong place, the wrong king . . . not powerful by inheritance but weak by design."

Whatever thoughts they have, their lives are changed when they get home. When we confront Jesus, God in the flesh calling us to love one another and attend to one another's most basic needs, our lives change. We cannot go home again . . . to the Jerusalem we once knew, to the palace where we once lived, to the assurance that we know what life entails, to the comfort of living in our own familiar world. God is making all things new, and it can hurt.

T.S. Eliot captures the dismay of the magi from the beginning of their journey to the end. "A hard time we had of it" one of them recalls, traveling at that time of year through alien territory with people suspicious of them all along the way. Wrong directions, political intrigue, and finally the place they least had expected. "It was (you may say) satisfactory." And then, this recollection:

"All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down this, set down this:  
Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?  
There was a Birth, certainly, we had evidence and no doubt.  
I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different;  
This Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their alien gods.  
I should be glad of another death." ("Journey of the Magi")

When we come to the stable and revere the gift from God, we cannot go home again . . . not to the normalcy of the way things were, whether it is in the places of power and privilege in Jerusalem or the comfort of a familiar culture. Even the shepherds returning to their sheep on the hills outside of Bethlehem have to change. It is a new day, uncomfortable to us all. Being vulnerable always makes us nervous. Being attentive to the needs of others always takes us to unfamiliar places. Being resistant to the arrogance of the mighty always puts us in jeopardy.

Not in the words of the prophet Isaiah and his confidence in a restored Jerusalem ruling the region, but of Micah, he himself a peasant from the hill country, God has promised that in the humble setting of an out-of-the-way stable in an out-of-the-way village there is born security to the ends of the earth. "He shall be the one of peace."

Let us not wait to hear that from our presidential candidates, from our legislators, from our civic officials. We have no time to waste. But let us live in attentiveness to one another's needs so that people coming from near and far may see and believe. Amen.