

The Journey of the Magi
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Date: January 1, 2017

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“The Journey of the Magi” Pilgrim Church UCC, January 1, 2017, New Year’s Day and observing Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12)

On this New Year’s Day, we’re jumping ahead in the Liturgical Calendar to hear about the visit of the wise men that’s supposed to be read on Epiphany—January 6. Couldn’t help it, the story’s too good not to consider! Epiphany is when we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ to all nations, represented by the magi who come to worship Christ. By the willingness of these wise people following the light of a Star, the whole story of Jesus’ birth changes. We can celebrate Jesus Christ as the light of the world, not just as an exclusive messiah to a select few. It’s a story centered on “wise men from the East” as they are called in Matthew’s Gospel. Though have you ever wondered if we should take this story more metaphorically or if there really were wise men who came to pay homage to Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem?

Early Christians struggled to understand this story and there was even a lengthy narrative written called the Revelation of the Magi. It claims to be a personal testimony of the magi themselves on the events of Christ’s coming into the world and for years was hidden away in the Vatican Library. (Maybe that sounds like The Da Vinci Code or something, but it’s true!) A scholar named Brent Landau was able to have access to that manuscript and translate the Revelation of the Magi into English from the original Syriac. So now English speakers can read this fascinating apocryphal writing that focuses on the events surrounding the birth of Jesus from the perspective of the magi.[1]

Why does all this matter? Because it shows that early on in Christianity people were focused on the magi and the journey they took to Bethlehem to find Jesus. It’s a remarkable tale that lends itself to vivid images and people longed to understand what to make of these events. Let’s be honest, there are some gaps present in the story. We don’t know the country of origin and no number or names are given to these wise men. We often say that there are three because of the gifts given to the holy family—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—though our story doesn’t exactly say how many showed up. There could have been five wise men but two of them were slackers and forgot gifts or gave bad gifts so we never got to hear about them! “Wise men” as a term has been noted as a bad translation of the Greek word *magoi* which elsewhere in the New Testament means “magicians” and is used negatively. Did Matthew not want to say that a bunch of local magicians showed up to see baby Jesus in Bethlehem and so he claimed that they were “wise men from the East”?

And those are just some gaps concerning the magi. What’s up with the star? There’s a star that the magi follow to find Jesus in Bethlehem in the Gospel. Joe Rao (an instructor at New York’s Hayden Planetarium) explains that the Christmas Star could have been a bright meteor, a comet, a nova or supernova outburst, or a grouping of the bright naked-eye planets that were confused for a star. The most compelling hypothesis revolves around the constellation Leo and the planets Venus and Jupiter. Now December 25th was not the actual date of Jesus’ birth, though we know that Jesus was born sometime between 7-3 B.C.E. It just so happens that in June of 2 B.C.E., to quote Joe Rao: “On the evening of June 17, Jupiter and Venus appeared even closer together than they did in the dawn skies of the previous August . . . at 8:30 p.m. local time they drew to within a mere 0.6 of an arc minute of each other while appearing in the western twilight sky. To the Magi the two brightest planets must have appeared to coalesce into one and glowed before them like a dazzling beacon over Judea.”[2]

So to recap what we know—there's these mysterious wise men from the East (or possibly more local magicians) who follow a star (or planets aligned close together) that rests directly over the place where the child Jesus happened to be. Or we could just take the whole tale on a more metaphorical level. It's no wonder that the early Christians struggled to understand this story just as much as Christians today! It's incredible!

What strikes me as amazing about this story is not just who the wise men may have been or the fact that they were following some sort of astronomical event to Bethlehem and saw right through Herod and his cruelty. What's amazing is that at its heart, it's a story about setting out from the familiar to take a journey to discover something new, someone unexpected, to even discover God. Traveling is good for us after all. It was Mark Twain who once declared "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness."

Some people may think that the idea that we're on a faith journey is used too much in Progressive Christianity. In the United Church of Christ we believe that each person is on a spiritual journey. We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God. Knowing that we are on a journey of faith has always struck me as moving, hopeful, and true even if we do say it a bunch in the UCC! Getting outside the familiar does help us to not fall into traps of prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness because we soon discover that our way isn't the only way.

Let's pause to consider Jesus as a grown man calling his first disciples.[3] One minute they are fishing out on the Sea of Galilee and the next, Jesus is saying "follow me." The disciples go with him just as they are. The disciples begin the journey alongside Jesus—who would become their teacher and friend in time. As scholar Charles Foster explains it, "They don't pray the conversion prayer, come along to church for a bit, and then do a discipleship course. Sure, there's baptism, and Jesus endorses John's formula of repentance, and those are obviously crucial . . . It is clear that Jesus-fascination often led to Jesus-following. It's still the case. . . They left their old lives behind and walked in the Jesus-direction." [4] Yes, they began on their journey of faith that would take them far from where they began on the shores of the Galilean Sea. And they would never be the same.

This concept of a faith journey or walking in the direction of God isn't even unique to Christianity alone whether we consider the journeys of the magi or the disciples. If we turn to other World Religions, we can contemplate Moses leading the Israelites through the wilderness to get to the Promised Land. God was with the people as they wandered, sometimes even providing light at night with a pillar of fire according to Exodus. We can turn to Buddhism for it's said that the Buddha's final words to his disciples were "walk on." One of the five pillars of Islam is hajj—the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims are to carry out at least once in their lifetimes. Faith journeys appear all over the place when you contemplate World Religions. Because there's something to be said about the journey and what we encounter along the way. The journey matters. Charles Foster further claims that a summary of our Christian Gospels could easily be, "let's go for a walk together." [5]

In the end, when we hear about the magi taking that journey to Bethlehem, when we contemplate how far they may have traveled with only a star as their guide we don't need to understand every aspect of this story from a historical perspective. We don't have to know for certain whether the magi were wise men from the East or some magicians from across town. We don't have to understand if the star was a single miraculous beacon of starlight that pierced the night sky or a couple of planets that were particularly close together that summer in Judea. Instead, we can perhaps devote ourselves to this idea that we love in the United Church of Christ—that each and every one of us is on a spiritual journey. Each and every one of us can develop a relationship with God by persistently searching for God. We can embark on our own faith journeys in this New Year. We can do our best to walk in the Jesus-direction right

here in our own backyard. That's the thing about journeys of faith—God will be with us no matter where we begin or where we may be going. Thanks be to God for the journey! Amen.

[1] Brent Landau, Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem, 1-34.

[2] Joe Rao, "Was the Star of Bethlehem a star, comet . . . or miracle?" December 23, 2011, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/45778305/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/w...

[3] Mark 1:16-20.

[4] Charles Foster, The Sacred Journey, 25.

[5] Foster, The Sacred Journey, 212.