

## Christmas 2, Year B

January 4, 2015

Matthew 2:1-12 *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, "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." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: `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.'"* Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; 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." 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

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I wonder what happened to those Magi *after* they returned home.

Did you ever notice how so many Bible stories leave us hanging, without definite endings? Loose ends never tied up?

Whatever happened to the older son in the story of the prodigal son? You remember that the older son was always obedient to his father, always did the right thing; and yet his father never gave *him* a party like he gave for his scoundrel younger brother. We are told that the loving father goes out to his elder son to try to convince him to come in to the party. But does the older son ever come in? Or does he stay sulking and stewing in his resentment and jealousy outside? The Bible doesn't tell us.

In the Gospel of John, the Gospel writer makes it a point to mention that the disciple Thomas was called "the Twin"; and yet nowhere is Thomas' twin mentioned. It seems strange that John, whose every word is heavy with symbolism, would include this detail for no purpose whatsoever. And yet *nowhere* are we told who Thomas' twin is.

On Christmas Eve, we heard the story of the angels' announcement to the shepherds to go see a child wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. The shepherds go, worship the child, and return to their fields. But what happens to them after they go back to their flocks? Has anything changed in their lives? Are they the same people they were before? Or is there a softening of

their hearts, more joy in their lives, more care and compassion for each other? We are left wondering, for Scripture never mentions those shepherds again.

And in today's Gospel, Wise Men come from the East, perhaps from as far away as Persia. When they see the star resting over the place where Jesus lies, they "rejoice exceedingly with great joy", enter the house and lay their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the Christ Child. Then, we are told, "being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they depart to their own country by another way." What do they think of this child? Do they think that Jesus is just one more king among many kings, among King Herod and their own Persian king? Or did traveling all that way, trusting the star, seeing the child and laying their gifts before him somehow change them deep within? Are they better people because of their long and difficult trip and their offerings of their gifts? Do they love their families more after that? Do they serve the poor, and seek Christ in others?

The Bible doesn't give us answers to any of these questions.

What is going on? Any short story writer knows not to introduce extraneous material to a story. Any mystery writer knows that at the end of the mystery there better not be any loose ends that aren't tied. Any novelist knows to bring a story to some kind of conclusion, *unless* -- unless there is going to be some sequel to the story, where the questions will be answered in another story.

And perhaps that is what the Gospel writers are trying to do. The difference between a typical biography and any of the Gospels (which have often been *called* "biographies of Jesus") is that in a biography, the reader is a detached observer; while in any of the Gospels, the reader is a *participant* in the story. Why isn't Thomas' twin named? I like to believe that it is because *each* of us *is* Thomas' twin, *each* of us is a doubter to at least some degree. Why isn't "the beloved disciple" named in the Gospel of John? Perhaps, as some say, it is because John himself was the beloved disciple; but I rather like to think it is because *we* are to fill in our *own* name; each of *us* *is* the beloved disciple. We are each called to discipleship just like one of the twelve. Why aren't we told whether the older brother of the prodigal son ever goes into the party? Because *we* are that older brother, standing outside the feast our heavenly Father is giving, thinking *we* have *earned* God's favor, with the result that we don't receive the gift of free grace God offers to all. Only you and I can answer the question of whether the older brother will give up his self-righteousness, will ever accept that he has *always* had *every* gift his father had to give, will forgive his younger brother, and go in to join the party.

And so it is, too, that those Wise Men are never named in the Bible, and their number is never given. (We only assume there were three because there were three types of gifts; but there could have been as few as two or as many as all the people who have ever lived). *We* are those who consider ourselves so much wiser than those ancient peoples who lived in Bible times -- we, who live in a far-away country in a far-away time. We have just been to the manger -- ten days ago. During the weeks of Advent, we traveled to Bethlehem; and we offered our gifts to the Christ Child on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. We fell down and worshipped Him for a moment. But now we have returned to our own far-away country, our own far-away time, our routine

lives, which are so different from that other-worldly mystery -- the silent night and beaming star, the heavenly hosts singing their unearthly song.

Christmas is perhaps the *only* time of the year when our culture allows us to openly talk about the reality of the spiritual. Only at Christmas is it OK to talk about heavenly signs, God becoming a human being, silent, holy nights -- and nobody laughs at us! Despite all its commercialization, Christmas still has the scent of the holy about it in our culture. People who may never *think* of going to church the rest of the year are drawn to church at Christmas. The spiritual reality hidden in this remarkable feast is that strong.

But come Tuesday, Christmas will officially be over. Many of us have *already* packed it all away.

Have we packed away the awe and wonder of Christmas along with the Advent wreath and nativity scene? Have we packed away the spirit of giving along with the wrapping paper and bows? Have we packed away the spirit of joy and thoughtfulness along with the lights and decorations? Have we packed away our focus on and commitment to the Church along with all our efforts to come and worship on Christmas Eve?

*You* are one of the shepherds who came to that crib! *You and I* are among the unnamed and unnumbered wise men or women who has now returned to this country so distant in time and space from the Bethlehem of Jesus' birth. Were the shepherds changed by that birth? Were the wise men or women changed by the giving of their gifts and their worship of the Christ Child? The Gospels offer no answers, for the answers are left to the countless sequels which you and I are called to write by the living out of our lives. The Wise Men from the East didn't simply send their *ambassadors* or representatives to bring gifts of homage to a new-born foreign king. Rather, the Wise Men came *in person* to **worship** this new-born king.

And so must we.

If the Christmas stories are simply stories about something that happened 2000 years ago, and nothing more, then we *will* likely pack them away with our ornaments and decorations, out of sight and mind until next December. But perhaps -- just perhaps -- these stories are meant to engage us, to draw us in, so that they truly become *our* stories. Perhaps these are *not* simply stories about nameless shepherds and Wise Men at the beginning of the First Millennium, but rather stories about *us* early in this **Third** Millennium being personally invited to come to the manger. Perhaps they are stories about *us* being guided by a star to worship *our* king, and *our* being warned to return to our lives by another route than that by which we came -- to approach 2015 in a radically different way than we have approached all previous new years.

As the poinsettias begin to wilt, the greens dry out and drop their needles, the Christmas season ends and we leave the manger to go back to our everyday lives, will we return by the same route we came? Or will we have been changed by our visit to the manger -- more forgiving when we have been wronged; more willing to seek Christ in others; more willing to pour out our lives to the poor, the sick, the lonely, the imprisoned; more joyful and loving; more grateful for what we have? Only you and I can answer those questions.

AMEN