

It is True
By Reverend Litton Logan
January 6, 2019

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 2:1-12 (RSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, '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.'³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^{*} and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go 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.'⁹ When they had heard^{*} the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^{*} until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^{*} they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON:

This Sunday, in the Church's liturgical year, is called Epiphany, which means an "appearance", and is celebrated on January 6th each year. It's nice that it falls on Sunday this year.

In the Eastern Orthodox Church, this day commemorates the baptism of Jesus. In the Western churches, Epiphany celebrates Jesus being recognized by wise non-Jews as the one foretold in ancient Hebrew texts, who would defeat Israel's enemies, deliver God's people from the oppression of their enemy, and usher in a time of peace and prosperity. Recognition of this ancient parallel to Jesus' ministry is symbolized in our texts about the Wise Men and is found only in the Gospel of Matthew. However, scripture does not tell us there were three wise men, only that wise men from the East brought three gifts. The assumption was three gifts, three wise men. Be that as it may, the story of the Magi brings to our hearts and minds a profound insight into the nature of God in Jesus the Christ.

So, to set an interpretive framework for the story of the Magi, let me share a story with you.

A Texas rancher driving through Vermont had to stop to let a farmer's cows cross the road. As the farmer passed in front of the Cadillac convertible, with the big long-horns on its hood, the Texas rancher called out to him, "How much land you got here, partner?"

"Well," the farmer said, "my land runs all the way down there to them alders along the brook. On the meadow side, over there, it goes clean up to those larches on the hill."

"You know," said the rancher, "I got a spread in Texas and I can get in my pickup and drive all day without reaching any of my boundary lines."

"That so?" said the farmer. "I had a truck like that once."

There have been, and I believe will continue to be, efforts to scientifically pin down the astronomical aspects of our scriptures. The modern mind has this obsession with scientific facts and historicity. However, as we all know, there is also a way of arriving at the truth of a thing that can only be grasped through allegories, poetry, and intuition. I am speaking of truths that transcend facts of this world and form the basis of our life values and beyond. If only we had as much of an obsession with this kind of truth as we do with science and so-called history.

And, it is to the ways of knowing truth beyond science and history that we must turn to understand the story of the Magi and the Christ Child. The story of the Magi is not just a wondrous story about an ancient, astrological phenomenon, but rather, it is a very personal, timeless, human epiphany that has life changing implications not only for us as individuals but for the whole human enterprise. Furthermore, I believe that the ancients were far, far more attuned to God's presence in this world than we are, and therefore would have listened to this story and not asked, "Is it factual," but rather, "What does it mean, is it true".

And, the test of the story, its power and authority for their lives, would have come from living by the truths inherent in the story not by dissecting its historicity or facticity. In this case, the truths imbued in the story of baby Jesus and the visit of these Zoroastrian priest-magician-scientists of their day, they would have been astrologists, would have symbolized the universal care and concern of God not only for the Jews, but for all people who venerate God and bless and support God's people. Incidentally, ancient and modern Judaism and Christianity owe much to the thoughts and teachings of the Zoroastrians - but that is another lesson.

So, I repeat the question of the ancients, "What does this story mean?" To answer this question, I need to ask some further questions.

Is it correct that the truly wise of this world acknowledge a profound presence of the holy in the witness and teachings of Jesus? Do the truly wise see at work in Jesus' life and teachings a universally authority that is relevant not only for this world but beyond? Yes, they do. Gandhi did, Mohammed did, and many Jewish rabbis did and do, as well as many others.

There is a story told that shortly before his death in 1910, Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author, wrote a letter to an admirer in South Africa. The letter asserted Tolstoy's belief in "the teaching of love," which Tolstoy found most completely embodied in the message of Christ. The recipient of the letter was Mohandas Gandhi, and the idea became reality in Gandhi's campaign of non-violence to oppose British rule in India. Inspired by the *Sermon on the Mount*, Gandhi used the most radical of tools - non-aggression - to stymie and ultimately overthrow the system of British, colonial rule. By the time of Gandhi's martyrdom in 1948, the world had come to glimpse, if not appreciate, his revolution based upon hope and non-violence predicated upon Christ's message of love and dignity. A revolution that was very difficult for the British government and all its mechanisms to repulse or defeat.

However, when I think of wise men and women, I can't help but think of the story about an angel that appeared at a conclave of religious leaders and told the presiding bishop that in return for his life-long, unselfish service, he was to be rewarded with his choice of wealth,

wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the bishop selected wisdom. "It is done!" the angel said, and then disappeared in a puff of smoke. All the other members of the meeting stared at the bishop with amazement. Finally, one of them whispered, "Now that you have infinite wisdom, Bishop, say something." The bishop looked at them and said, "I should have taken the money."

Some wise people of this world may not make the supernatural and deified claims for Jesus and his life that many of his followers across the ages have done, but they nonetheless recognize that there was something of the universal-holy in his life and teachings, and he is someone whose message needs to be studied and listen to. Thus, Jesus spoke a truth that was not only authoritative for his time but also for the universal, human condition for all time.

Is it true that some intelligent, greedy, self-possessed and powerful people of this earth have sought to destroy, distort, or co-opt his message? Yes, King Herod is a good example. Why? Jesus' teaching threatens certain kinds of earthly rulers and power mongers. His message accuses those who see themselves as so intelligent and above the ordinary that they can make their own moral and ethical rules. His teachings of charity and universal love, including loving one's enemies, threatens to unmask certain so-called differences among people that many rulers and governments use to foster distrust and suspicion as a means of maintaining their power and to serve their economic and political interests.

So, yes, it is definitely true, powerful people, rulers, kings, and even some religious leaders have sought to hijack the teachings of Jesus to further their own interests at the expense of what was at the heart of Jesus' life and teachings.

Is it true that the truly wise recognize that God's care and concern for this world often comes in unexpected and unconventional ways? Yes, they do, because the wise understand that in our age-old human arrogance and pride, we try to define what is real and right, not only for ourselves and others, but also for God. We fashion our religions and our governments out of our pride and ignorance and demand God buy into them and validate their "right-ness" instead of honoring all humanity as made in the image of God and divine children.

A little serendipity illustration may make my point. It was a bitterly cold day in a major, mid-western city. A small boy stood shivering on a steel grate in the sidewalk that offered up a little heat. His clothes were thin and tattered. A grey-haired lady, appropriately dressed for the weather, stopped and engaged the youngster in conversation. She learned that he had chosen to stay outside in the cold rather than in his apartment with his mother, her boyfriend, and their drug-using friends. He often got mistreated when they were all doing drugs. The compassionate stranger took the young lad into a clothing store nearby and outfitted him from head to foot, including cap, scarf, and gloves.

The lad was warm and filled with gratitude. He could not thank the lady enough. As they said goodbye and walked in opposite directions, the little boy turned back to ask, "Are you God's mother?" Laughing, the lady said, "Oh no! I'm just a child of God." Whereupon the lad remarked, "Yeah, well I knew you were related."

—Jones (Sermon Illustrations, Cokesbury, IPreach)

It is true that the Good News of God's care and concern frequently slips in barely noticed and its effects grow slowly, usually from the bottom up? Yes, that is the obvious point of the story about a young insignificant Jewish girl in a backward part of the world, whose child was conceived under suspicious circumstances, and gave birth in a stable. Her son grew to adulthood and became a voice and a presence of the Holy One of the Universe, whose teachings live in the hearts and minds of over 1/5 of the world's population and its essence in the hearts and minds of many more, who may not be called Christians. Mary's son literally shaped the

course of human history and is still a force to be reckoned with in the day-to-day affairs of this world.

I believe the Christ had to come into the human condition in such an obscure and ignominious way, so he and his truths could not be co-opted and become just the religious or intellectual property of an elite few at the expense of the many. I say this because the power of love cannot be faked or institutionalized, its appearances can be mimicked for a time, but in the end the truth of love bears its own power and witness, revealing pretenders and authentic alike, be they individuals or institutions. You see, love does not seek to dominate but elevate and care for the beloved unconditionally.

Therefore, is it a fact that three or some ancient, wealthy priest-scientists from somewhere in Mesopotamia follow the confluence of two stars or the tail of a comet to arrive at Bethlehem laden with gifts for the baby Jesus just because they read in an ancient Jewish text (Numbers 24:17) that an astronomical phenomenon would be the sign of a great, deliverer of the Jews? Did they follow the star because they wanted to ingratiate themselves to this deliverer and his coming reign? I don't know, and neither does anyone else.

However, is it true that God's will and love for all humankind was made known in the life, witness, and teachings of Jesus Christ? Yes! The story of the Magi speaks of holy truths even though we cannot validate its history.

In closing let me share some thoughts from Sir John C. Eccles (1903-1997), an Australian neurophysiologist who won and shared in the 1963 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his work on the synapse in our brains: Sir John Eccles said, *"I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity. This belief must be classed as a superstition ... we have to recognize that we are spiritual beings with souls existing in a spiritual world as well as material beings with bodies and brains existing in a material world."*

Eccles echoes the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15.

No matter what else this story of the Magi, Herod's deviousness, a peasant girl and her baby born in a grotto used to stable animals may say to us, its essence is that God cares for all humanity and is personally involved with us in our life and the life of this planet. And, the truly wise will listen to that testimony in the teachings and witness of Jesus' life and live accordingly. And, that's the Truth of the story of the Magi.

One finally question, "Do people recognize that we are related to God?"

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