

## **"WHICH WAY DID THEY GO?"**

Psalm 72:1-14  
Matthew 2:1-12

John H. Strassburger  
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The story of the wise men is a familiar one and yet there is much in the story that remains a mystery. Important questions are left unanswered. They came from the East, but where specifically? The writer refers to the travelers as "Magi" but what does that mean? Some have argued that they were a rather second-rate group of astrologers or magic makers, while others suggest that they were probably reputable astronomers. Still others propose that they were part of a priestly cult from Persia. No scholar gives substantiation for a kingly status. Their numbers are not given in the gospel accounts. Some have thought the story may well be a parable rather than a historical account. A story so familiar and yet, is it?

### **I.**

So what is it that we can apply to our life from this story? To begin with, I believe we can pick up on the nature of the journey itself. We all are pilgrims in life. Each of us striving for integrity and harmony with ourselves and the world. Some would say - engaged in the pursuit of happiness, of peace of mind or fulfillment. This seeking is summarized by Victor Frankl's affirmation: "The striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force of [humankind]."

On our life's journey, there will be maps to read, provisions sent in, detours to adjust to, shadowed forests and deep valleys to pass through, mountain top experiences and stars to guide us. To borrow Michenor's phrase, "We are on the road coming home to ourselves."

The wise men, not sure who it was they were seeking, not even knowing precisely where they were headed, found their journey ended in an encounter with the Divine. And this is the Christian profession, that like the wise men, every human soul, though not always certain of life's leading, or conscious of such striving, is ultimately moving toward communion with God. To be on such a journey as Phillips Brooks has said, "Is as instinctive as the movement of a hurt child to its mother or a parched beast to the river."

Someone has written, "So intimate is the proper relationship of our nature to God that without God no human being can gain completion. When this completion is not found all the races of the world persistently keep up the quest." Like Augustine we may be led to echo, "Created for Thyself our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."

Thus, the first element we can take from this story is the reality of our lifelong pilgrimages.

### **II.**

Moreover, the church's affirmation is that this struggle whereby we seek to come to terms with our life and destiny is not a one-sided effort, but rather a mutual striving between heaven and earth. The great painting of Michelangelo on

the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome shows the hand of God extending to the out-stretched hand of Adam, establishing contact between the infinite and the finite. The biblical picture is of a Creator standing in the Garden of Eden and calling out "Adam, where art thou?" The "hound of heaven" pursues us down the labyrinth of ways wherein "Deep calleth unto deep." This is the ancient and undying profession of faith - that while the human soul searches for God, God is also seeking us.

This is the second affirmation of this gospel story - God is a searching God. Thomas Kelly, a modern saint, has written, "Eternity is at our hearts pressing upon our time-worn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself." And even more, God takes the first and utterly decisive step toward us. We do not seek out God as if God were some great fact to be uncovered by human inquiry alone. God breaks out of hiding, revealing, initiating, calling, comforting, challenging, willing that we be not strangers, striving to love us back into our Godly birthright.

This is hardly the same God as the distant, disinterested, divine that some well-meaning religionists portray. It is God fashioning the star, offering sign posts along our journey.

And this is precisely what that band of travel-weary Magi discovered at their journey's end. Their travel to find fulfillment of their quest, an answer to their searching of the heavens, brought them to the serene scene of new life and the great joy of humble peasant parents. But it also brought them much more than they ever imagined.

In that sanctuary of Divine and human encounter, they found in the face of that small December child, a child born in such impoverished surroundings, the very spirit of God. Grasped by an undeniable awareness of One who had been seeking them all along, at life's most profound depths, they fell down and worshiped. There, in a way indescribable, the wonder of God and human life came together unmistakably.

Now, one element of the story is certain. As any new mother knows, Mary was about to become a very busy person. Peak events in life don't last long. The wise men were expected to be returning home to report on their experiences. Time soon arrives for moving on. But before they packed up they offered gifts to that family. And following that giving they shared a vision together. The gospel writer does not elaborate on it much, saying simply that through it, they were warned not to return to Herod.

However, such a dream must have incorporated something more than fear of Herod's cruelty. It must have been something through which they perceived the promise of the Incarnation, of "good news of a great joy which would be to all people." Surely it was a vision of how the world could be different, the possibility of a full life for all persons in the human family. The God whose name is Emmanuel, or, "I am with you," sent them heading in a different direction. They left that first Christmas different from how they had arrived.

### III.

And this is the final concern that I would share with you from this scripture. Not only does Christmas speak of our searching and striving for that which is beyond us in life, and of God's search for humankind, but it calls for us to leave different. To return to our homes unchanged is to have missed Christmas.

A group of men probably from a prominent and powerful nation, who knew the reputation of Herod, defied his command, risking their lives to preserve the life of one poor dependent infant whom they found in a cave stable in some obscure village, in a feeble nation historically overrun by almost any country at will, and at that time occupied by Roman warriors. Almost laughable, had they not risked their very lives for those three impoverished, seemingly insignificant people. They must have dreamed of one world under God that demanded a radical personal commitment to every life.

Today there is no greater concern for the church, yea, for the world, than the plight of the world's hungry. The infant Jesus outgrew that Bethlehem scene, but he was never a stranger to poverty. Near the end of his life, the Scriptures record him saying, "The son of man has no place in which to lay his head." He was homeless. He always identified himself with the poor, the social outcasts, and the politically oppressed.

Now as then, Christ bids us to come follow him. If Christmas is really to mean something to us, it will mean that we go home this year by a different way, with a different perspective on life.

Christ has guaranteed us that, like his birth, he will be found by us through significant, personal involvement in the lives of the poor and hungry. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . before him will be gathered all nations . . . and he will say to those on his right hand, "Come happy ones inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was  
hungry and you gave me food,  
thirsty and you gave me drink,  
a stranger and you welcomed me,  
naked and you clothed me,  
sick and you visited me,  
in prison and you came to me." (Matthew 25:31-36)

In considering this sermon, I was led to think of the current situation with which our country is involved in Somalia, through Operation Restoration of Hope.

As a people of means, we have responded by sharing with a people in dire need - people who are starving. The mission of our troops is to secure the food supply lines in a nation in which thousands of infants face starvation.

Last week, a Navy Chaplain told me "Our troops need our prayers. It's one thing to deal with dead bodies; it's very different to deal with starving children!"

Obviously it's not easy. These troops will return from their journey different people. The dark side of life is meeting them. The singing, dancing and cheering of hungry people are greeting them. God is coming to them, addressing their hearts, changing their lives.

I recently heard a Marine officer interviewed who said "It's blowing me away. They're clapping and cheering and it hurts! I wouldn't want this for my children! I was angered that people let this happen. But of all the missions we're trained to do, I'd much rather be doing this. When I finally leave here, I'm going to have a different perspective on helping people. It's a very satisfying feeling!"

However noble this venture, we don't have to go half 'way around the world to find hungry people. Jean Weston, the founder of the Wauwatosa Food Pantry told me recently that the Pantry serves hundreds monthly - more than four times the number they were serving ten years ago. She says that they are serving more former middle management people now, who have found it taking longer to find work again.

The problem of hungry people is vast and complex. We're not called to solve it but to begin to make a radical, personal response.

Nancy Gross of our staff keeps this quote of Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India, of the Sisters of Compassion, on her desk:

"You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.'

So you begin . . . I begin. I picked up one person. Maybe if I didn't pick up that one person I wouldn't have picked up 42,000.

The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't put a drop in, the ocean would be one drop less.

Same thing for you, same thing in your family, same thing in the church where you go, just begin . . . one, one, one."

My friends, our lives are our journeys home to God. God eternally reaches out to us. We meet each other at the point of responding to human need, when and where it encounters us. Let us vow this morning that we will make a difference in the lives of those in need; that we will go home from this Christmas a different people! In the name of the Lord Christ, Amen!