

Encounters with the King: The Journey Home
Matthew 2:1-12
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Preached January 6, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica

Much has been written through the years on the journey the wise men took to arrive in the barn at Bethlehem, but comparatively little about their journey home. All we have is that one cryptic line, “And then, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they returned home by another route,” compared to the elaborate lead up to the arrival at the manger. But isn’t what happened after the visit what is really important? Isn’t the route they took home, or better to the point, the journey they followed the rest of their lives, what really matters? Coming to Jesus is relatively easy. Going out into the world is a little tougher.

But we are in luck tonight, because as a Christmas gift, I received a rare copy of an ancient manuscript which may shed some light on that journey home by the wise men. It turns out even though we don’t have any words actually written by the wise men, we do have the account preserved by the head steward of the expedition, the one charged with the logistics, and making sure the trip went off as planned. He apparently wrote a report that was recently uncovered in a cave in Iraq, during the war there, the very same cave where Saddam Hussein was finally captured. It has now been translated and made public to a select group of pastors of international churches such as ECF, so consider yourselves quite lucky to be here

tonight. So here now are the relevant sections of the Gospel According to the Chief Steward of the Wise Men of the East.

“We three kings,” as they used to call themselves, had never been particularly close, just thrown together for this mad journey by our reckless kings who wanted to make sure they has all their political bases covered. Oh, they talked along the way there, shared a few Magi secrets of the trade, lamented how long it was taking, but they weren’t what you could call friends. There was no lingering around the campfire swapping stories before calling it a night. It was just dinner and bed, and the road again in the morning with the occasional occupational hazard of stargazing keeping us all up late every now and then.

But something changed when we arrived in Judea. I think the first I could see they were destined to become closer was when Herod took of them one by one in for questioning, to see if they could keep our stories straight. As each returned from interrogation, and yes, that is what it was, an interrogation, we learned that Herod would begin each as if it were a conversation over a cup of coffee, as if this were going to be a friendly, getting to know you kind of chat. But he never seemed satisfied by their answers, never convinced by our simple curiosity to see where the star would lead us. And when he finally sent us on our way, we began to feel a little nervous, like someone was following us, although we all did wonder aloud what kind of buffoon Herod had for a security chief who couldn't find the boy even in such a small town. But on we went until the star stopped over a certain dwelling,

and with no small amount of trepidation, but also with an abundance of pretty authentic joy, we prepared ourselves to enter into the indicated residence, if that is what you could call it. I know my heart was pounding, and I think I could hear the others' too.

When we finally went in, I have to say it was actually kind of anticlimactic. I mean, it was just a baby and his parents in a small, plain kind of place. I guess I'm not sure what we were expecting, but after you ride a camel for that many months, I suppose you create a picture in your mind's eye, but this wasn't it. All we found was a baby and his parents. If he really was a king, it certainly didn't look like a great start to his reign. But we'd come all that way, and schlepped all those gifts, so what else could we do but give the gifts, and so we did. When we brought out the gold, I thought the father Joseph's eyes would burst out of his head. He just kept muttering, "I can't believe it. I can't believe it." And when we brought forth the frankincense, Mary had this adorable sweet smile on her face. It was priceless. I'll never forget that smile. Like she was treasuring away that moment in her heart. They were a little mystified by the gift of myrrh, but then again so was I, the Magi having convinced me that it was somehow appropriate. I never did see their point since it is used to prepare dead people for burial, and this child had just been born, but whatever, let them think they know everything; I suppose he won't live forever anyway, and will need it sometime. Yes, for all of us, it seemed just a little underwhelming, and we left wondering if it had been worth the trip.

But it was on the way home that something changed for us, especially the Magi. At first, I thought that they were just really focused on getting home again. But after a while I could see that with every passing mile, every day we were further and further away from Judea, that they were each deeper and deeper in thought than they normally were. And then something extraordinary happened. One by one, each of them came to me, of all people, to talk about what they had just experienced. I say it was extraordinary because these were learned gentlemen who needed nothing from me except their food prepared on time, and to have the camels fed and saddled. They barely spoke to one another, much less the help. But for whatever reason they did, I am glad they came to me, so that I might share with you, gentle reader, the secrets they learned in Bethlehem.

The first Magus to open my tent flap was the one they called Melchoir, I believe he was the eldest, and certainly the most learned. It was he who had assembled the gifts we brought. He was a student of the teachings of Aristotle, and was much influenced by the Greek line of thought that gifts were really best only given to equals, especially extravagant gifts. That was why he brought gifts reserved for royalty, since we had heard that the child Jesus was to be the King of the Jews. He may not have been king yet, but we believed he would be one day. That is what made what he said to me know that meeting this boy king had really made an impact upon him. He began by admitting some uncertainty when we walked into that quite modest dwelling. He said, "What were we thinking. What

will happen to these very expensive gifts? Surely they will be stolen. And if not, they will probably be squandered by his parents.” But, he said, those feelings later gave way to a more profound reflection. Then he said, “We thought we were bringing gifts to an equal, in the tradition of Aristotle, where gifts are really only given to friends, which is to say, peers of equal social standing. But now I see that we misjudged him. He may have been a king. But seeing him there in that cradle, all that I can think of him now was that he was a human being, and it should have been on the basis of *that* equal standing between us, before his God and ours, that we should have brought him gifts. We brought gifts fit for a king, but all we really needed to offer was ourselves. And might that not be true for everyone, king or not?” I must say I was dumbfounded. Melchoir took his inspiration from the stars, not from mere mortals.

When Balthazar, the second of the Magi, sought me out, I was even more amazed. He was always a very serious presence on our trip, brooding about whether we were on the right track following the star, a real worrier. When he called for me, I was expecting a tongue lashing about the pace of our return, but he greeted me with an enormous smile, and even offered me an elixir from his cabinet. Then he went on to tell me how ever since the visit to the boy, he had felt his heart expanded, and a great burden lifted. “All these years,” he said, “All these years of study and watching the stars were of the utmost importance to me. I sacrificed much for the wisdom I believed was available in my books and star

maps. But perhaps I have sacrificed too much. In the presence of that boy, I felt the wonder of my own childhood. When I looked at his mother, I saw my own mother. I feel that he has turned me from the stars back to earth, and for that I will always be grateful. Here, have another drink!” Well, this Jesus was certainly having an effect of the delegation.

A few days later, it was the third Magi, Caspar, who shared his thoughts with me. Caspar was the one who was most concerned about the politics of the day, who wondered aloud before the trip if it was a good idea to visit an infant labeled a king by some, but who was found in a territory already ruled by a properly installed king. “I am most glad,” he said, “to have made his acquaintance, and to have seen with my own eyes the one whom the Jews proclaim will be responsible for bringing the nations together. The heavens know we need it now more than ever. I used to believe that it was impossible for there to be one king of us all, and I still believe that if you mean one king to rule our kingdoms. We are just too divided. But I saw in that child one who can rule all our hearts, and with such an allegiance, there is no imagining how great all of our kingdoms could be. And yet he possessed no force of his own, except what has become evident in his effect on me. And in that there is more power than even King Herod can imagine.”

We learned after our arrival home that we were the first people outside Jesus’ own people to meet him. I cannot yet speculate what historical importance this may have, except that if the experience of the Magi is any indication, he will

have an influence on the world much wider than his own nation. In any case, he has already done what I thought previously to be almost unattainable: to turn the hearts and minds of our greatest sages from their contemplations of the heavens to the contemplation of the Kingdom of Heaven, and all its benefits.

That the experience might not be lost in the mists of time, should all our words fade away, I commissioned one of our local musicians write a ballad about our experience. Based on the conversations I have shared in this report, this is what he came up with:

Once upon a cold December many long years ago,
Three important kings took time to travel a year or so;
Over mountains, thru deep valleys, trav'ling awf'ly slow.
They took time to seek a Savior, long years ago.

With no heaters, Howard Johnson's, nothing to ease the way,
With no compass, Esso maps or help from the A.A.A.,
No galoshes, scarves, umbrellas, for a rainy day.
They took time and pains to find him, the hardest way.

What we learn from these three wise men is that we must take time,
Time to find him, time to follow thru all the grit and grime.
There are valleys we will enter, there are hills we'll climb.
He will help us thru it all if we just take time.

["Take Time," by Richard Avery, Donald Marsh, ©1967, ASCAP]

Well, there you have it. All you need to know about both the journey home of the wise men, and some of the ways people have responded to him through the years. Christmas has come and gone. We have made our way to Jesus. What will you do on the journey home? Amen.