

The Gift of the Magi

The Magi, or the Wise Men from the east, are a major disturbance in the force. Herod knows it, Mary and Joseph know it, they do not belong in this story on any account. They do not come because of the Spirit of God or because an angel told them to, they came because they had observed a phenomenon they did not understand. They were astronomers or astrologers and some kind of sign in the heavens had caused them to leave home and travel. Who knows what sort of prophecies they were using to connect this sign to the birth of the Messiah. Maybe they had access to the scrolls of the Hebrew Prophets, maybe they were “God-fearers,” as Jews often called Gentiles who were seeking truth in their story. Maybe they did not, maybe they thought something else entirely was happening.

It’s hard to say exactly what they are and what they’re looking for, but there’s one thing we know for sure, they are mystics. They are people for whom the concrete and ordinary reality of life is simply not enough. They are probably men who have experienced the transcendent, even if it was in the form of Zoroastrianism or paganism. They were men who looked to the heavens for truth, and considered the vastness of space and the burning light of stars in the endless void. They were men who studied those things and assigned meaning to their observations. Once you get the flavor of God’s mystery, you want more of it, and so here they come, blundering as it were, into the middle of a situation they do not understand, despite being called “wise men.”

I want to tell you something important about this story, these men are the first of many who are going to come to Jesus by different roads, and leave the same way. They are not faithful Jews, they are not followers of the Law of Moses. The term that we sanitize to “wise men,” is actually woodenly translated magicians or wizards of the stars. We find a man in Acts named Simon Magus, same root as Magi, who is a practitioner of the occult. These men were, as is commonly accepted, astronomers, people with special knowledge of heavenly phenomena, but in that day and age the study of the heavens was rife with occultism and what can only be called sorcery. Peculiar folk to show up in Bethlehem.

God does this sort of thing all the time, creates these moments of transcendence, these moments where the mundane reality of the world we live in most of the time is just shredded. I guarantee you Mary never forgot this moment, when three foreign wizards showed up to worship her baby, and gave her a bunch of very valuable things. But what happened to the Magi? Were their lives changed? Did they become “disciples?” How could they? Jesus was a baby, there was no teaching, there were no miracles, all of that stuff was thirty years away, and they had lives to live and stars to study and more mysteries to investigate. Thus we see the weakness of mystics, they may experience the presence of God, but they don’t always know what to do about it, sometimes they just do what is called “ghosting.”

Here’s where we stand, we have had a good time celebrating the Baby Jesus and all, but it’s Epiphany now, which aside from being the name of this day on the Church calendar, is also a word with a plain meaning: *a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.* We see it, we “get it,” but do we know what to do with it? That is often where mystics fall down and where the practical work of priests and prophets begins. There is always some degree of tension between mystics and visionaries and the people who are figuring out what to do with the things we see in those moments of epiphany, even when those two groups are actually the same people. Mystics like John of the Cross, and Theresa of Avila, who were a Priest and a Nun respectively were held rather uneasily by their

institutions. The Roman Catholics still don't quite know what to do with Thomas Merton and he's been gone for decades.

Speaking as an unapologetic Protestant, I believe we need to balance the experience of the transcendent with the practices of working and walking in the faith. The necessity for this goes both ways, you can't force God to show up, no matter how spooky mystical you want to get, you just can't make a star rise in the east. Most mystics experience very dark times when God seems profoundly absent, and the only thing that gets them through is the memory of the moments when they felt the Presence. That stuff is hard to get through without some kind of routine, thus we have sacraments and worship and the life of the church, with all its foibles. The routine just can't become the only thing though. That isn't going to change the world, that's going to lead to Herod and his priests slaughtering babies, and no, I'm not just being dramatic. The church must never become an empire or even the arm of one. We've actually tried that, and again speaking as an unapologetic Protestant, it did not go well from a Jesus perspective.

The Apostle Paul actually saw pretty early that the Body of Christ was going to need some varied and various parts to work right. Not everyone can be a prophet, or a priest, or a mystic, or a pastor or a healer. In fact, if everyone were one thing the Body would be missing parts. One thing the Magi showed us pretty early in the story is that you shouldn't write anyone off or try to exclude someone from the mystery of God's grace and love. No, they don't really belong in this story if you see it strictly as a continuation of the Hebrew Scriptures, or if you see it as a hagiography of the deeds of only the most holy people. The gift the Magi really give us is the truth that anyone can be drawn to God, for almost any reason. Sometimes the devout cannot find God and the idly curious do so by accident. Epiphanies come unexpectedly, but when they do it is important that we let them speak to us and change our minds and hearts, so that we go home by a different road.