

How many of you can find the North Star? Can you recognize constellations like Orion and Casseopia? Do you know that one of the brightest stars in the winter and spring skies is sometimes called the Dog Star? Do you know that certain constellations can only be seen in certain times of the year, but some like Ursa Major in the northern hemisphere and Crux (or the Southern Cross) in the southern hemisphere can be seen virtually all year round?

The *Gospel according to Matthew* tell of men coming from the East inquiring about the baby Jesus whose birth they saw foretold in the stars. As I noted before reading this passage, the story is only found in Matthew. It is a great story at several levels. It is the basis for our gift-giving at Christmastime. It is a story of mystery and beauty that inspires Christmas carols — not just the one we'll sing at service's end, but those like "The Little Drummer Boy" and stories like *The Littlest Angel*; all of which remind us that each person has something to give. As a sidebar, what talents, interests, or passions might you see as gifts from God that you can offer to Jesus? What gifts, spiritual as well as physical or financial, can be given to others around you; especially to those in need?

The men who came from afar were described as wise because they knew the stars. They could recognize the constellations; they knew the times of the year when the Pleiades emitted their shower and how often regular comets like Halley's swung by. Not only could they navigate by the stars, they drew portents from the rising and conjunction of the planets.

But, maybe there's some truth in the old joke about what would have happened if there had been 3 wise women instead of the wise men. You know how it goes — the women would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and included disposable diapers in the gifts. My oldest sister loves sending that one out each year, and I love pointing out that the wise men did ask for directions, even if they may not have been able to do the rest.

In any case, the joke shows the stereotypical difference between men and women. And, while *Matthew* calls the men, *μάγοι*, the root cognate for magician, these men were astrologers, probably practitioners of Zoroastrianism, an ancient Persian religion. In any case, as I said, they did ask for directions, but of all the people they could have asked, Herod was not their best choice...

You know how certain ancient kings and queens were given qualifiers to their names that highlighted their reign or personage? Henry the Navigator who never sailed himself but who was patron to the many Portuguese explorers of the 15th century, or Catherine the Great, or the French rulers such as Pepin the Younger (sometimes called the Short), or Charles the Bald who was not to be confused with Charles the Fat, his nephew. And of course there is Henry the Eighth who had six wives...For Jewish ruler of the Roman province of Palestine, an apt descriptor might be Herod the Bloody, which is probably what led Anna Florence Carter and others to note that in imagining how the first people might have heard this story they must

have fallen out of their chairs laughing. *"Those men did WHAT? They waltzed straight into Jerusalem and said WHAT? With Herod on the throne?!"*

Somehow, though, it doesn't surprise me that the out-of-towners would ask the reigning king about where to find the newborn prophesied to become "King of the Jews." In those days, news didn't travel fast. Perhaps these magi hadn't heard how this Herod had killed all of his sons so none would inherit his throne. Perhaps they hadn't known about Herod's penchant for answering in blood when he didn't know or like the question. What is it about us humans that we are drawn to the folks whose lifestyle is exotic, or is seen as desirable? I'm pretty sure that the wise men were a bit clueless about Herod, for all their "book smarts." They remind me of stereotypical absentminded professors. While they may not have been "street-smart", as we say now, they "wised up" pretty quick after bringing homage to the Christ-Child.

Still, like the magi, we are drawn to folks who are less likely to help us. The movie stars and recording artists whose lifestyles are extravagant, whose houses are palatial, whose knowledge of how the world works is rarely any

houses are palatial, whose knowledge of how the world works is rarely any better than our own are sometimes seen as worthy of adoration. Politicians and news pundits can be just as chancy. It's hard not to, I'll admit. Something about these folks draws us like moths to a flame.

This story of exotic travelers from the East is an easy one to keep on the surface. But, we heard how Herod is afraid. Reading a bit further in *Matthew*, we hear how this results in tragedy. Jesus' birth is occasioned by

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a note of fear and opposition — a note, by the way, that will follow Him throughout His earthly life and ministry.

Why?

Perhaps it is because the one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power. Gone from Herod and his court is any notion of the kind of servant leadership prescribed and required by Israel's prophets. Gone is the memory that God placed them in their positions to serve rather than be served. Herod seeks his own ends and so is immediately threatened by even the mere mention of another — and therefore rival — king. Or perhaps, it's also simply that the presence of these three magi and their quest for God's messiah announce that the world is changing, that God is approaching, and that nothing can remain the same in the presence of God's messiah. The arrival of these wondering astrologers signals that the reach of God's embrace is broadening considerably, that there is no longer "insider" and "outsider," but that all are included in God's plan for salvation.

This isn't a new theme in Judaism, as from the very beginning of the story when God promises to bless Abraham so that he may, in turn, be a blessing from the world. But now it is happening — all distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions is dissolving. All are becoming one in Christ, and who knows what may change next.

Change, as we know, can be a scary thing. But, we need to remember that even though the world seems darker, more ambivalent, and more fear-inducing, it is into just such a world that God came. It is to people who are so mastered by fear, who often do the unthinkable that God so loves. It is this world that knows and sees a gaping need to which God brings a remedy. Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us, the living, breathing and vulnerable promise that God chose to come live and die and rise again for us, just as we are, so that we too might experience newness of life.

Perhaps *Matthew* sketches his telling of Jesus' birth — and our lives — with darker strokes precisely so that we might perceive the glory and grace of God's redemption in Christ more clearly, kind of like a bright star shining high in the heavens, drawing us in to greet our savior and Lord.

So, let us look beyond the exotic, beyond the tinsel and the dazzle and see the humble beginnings of our Savior and Lord who came as a child, meek and lowly, yet born a king to rule with justice and love. Let us be drawn by His star to follow where He leads, to give of ourselves, and to invite others to join in the work of His Kin-dom.

Let us pray: Mighty and holy God, the star You placed in the heavens continues to draw us, to ask "Where is the child born King of the Jews?," to lead us to a stable in the lowliest of circumstances. Such a star led others to bring homage to the Christ Child. Let us continue to give our worship and of ourselves and let us invite others to give of their gifts to the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Prince of peace. Amen.