

## *Revelation of the Magi*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Isaiah 60:1-6** Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. <sup>2</sup> For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. <sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. <sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. <sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. <sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

<sup>NRS</sup> **Matthew 2:1-12** In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> '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.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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By now, most of us have taken down the Christmas lights, packed away the ornaments, and removed the Christmas tree from the living room. In some ways, in some households, Christmas is over when the first televised football game begins on the afternoon of December 25<sup>th</sup>. For others, Christmas fades away as thoughts about New Year's Eve and the beginning of a new year begin to occupy their minds. I had a phone call from a reporter with the High Point Enterprise. He wanted to know what my message would be to the congregation regarding the New Year. I had to stop and think a moment because there isn't much of a link between God's will for us and the secular calendar. The calendar that we have is our invention. It serves our secular purposes. It has been adjusted at various times so that it more accurately matches the exact length of time it takes for the earth to go around the sun.

We have another calendar that shows the church year. The year begins with the first Sunday in Advent. Christmas actually begins on Christmas Day and goes through Epiphany on January 6, which gives us the twelve days of Christmas. In many Christian cultures, gifts are given to Christ on Christmas - and gifts to friends and family are not given until Epiphany, the day when we remember the visit by the Magi. So, my first reaction to the question from the reporter was that I hoped people weren't distracted by all of the hoopla about New Year's and were still remembering and living the Christmas message. I hoped that they woke up every morning with memories of the angels singing "Peace on earth" and that they sought ways to increase the peace in their own heart, in their family, in their neighborhood, and in the world.

Today, I'd like to take one more look at a text that is part of the Christmas story. The story of the Magi is vague in several ways. They come from the East, but where in the East isn't said. We refer to these visitors as kings, wise men, or magi. It's rather uncertain as to what they really were. The Greek word here is translated as magician everywhere else in the New Testament - and it's not a positive term. It's been suggested that they were astrologers, but, if so, that wasn't a respected occupation in Jewish culture. However, we want to think of these visitors as highly respected people - perhaps because they brought expensive gifts.

The star is kind of a puzzle, too. Sometimes we'll see articles that say perhaps the star was a super nova, or a comet, or some other astronomical event. When I thought about it, it's hard to imagine how a star could be clearly stopped over one particular house. When my dog was a bit younger, she would wake me up in the middle of the night to step outside for a few minutes. In our backyard, at two or three in the morning, on a clear night you can see quite a few stars. But they're so far away that they certainly don't seem to be right over some specific place.

Where there are gaps in the story, we tend to fill in the details. Look at Christmas cards. Since there were three gifts, we always picture three visitors – although the text doesn't tell us how many magi there were. Since the gifts were expensive, the visitors are always elegantly dressed. We've even come up with names and ethnicities for the three kings. And all of the paintings show them riding camels. All of that – number, names, economic status, ethnicity, and camels – those are all made up – all traditions that have accumulated over the years. And if you look closely at the Christmas cards and the church live nativity scenes – it always looks like the Magi arrive at the same time as the shepherds. The text in Matthew doesn't say exactly, but one could imply that the Magi might have arrived up to two years after Jesus was born. As I said, we tend to fill in gaps in the story as Matthew tells it.

We love secrets and mysteries. If you want to get a book read, give it a title like *What Your Doctor Won't Tell You*, *Secrets of the Masonic Lodge*, *Lost Treasures of the Andes*, *The De Vinci Code*, or *The Other Books of the Bible*. We want to have the inside information – and we're pretty suspicious that someone is trying to keep us from knowing the whole truth. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were pieced back together and translated there was a booming industry in speculation about what was written in them, why that would change everything, and how church officials were conspiring to keep the contents secret. A few months ago a book was published with the title *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*. Naturally I bought it and read it!

There have been some news stories and interviews over the past several weeks about this book. Before you get some impression about the book that might exaggerate its history or importance, let's look at the facts of the situation. First of all, the *Revelation of the Magi* was never suppressed or lost or censored or condemned. The ancient manuscript that we have today is a copy made in a monastery in southeastern Turkey in the late 700s. At some point it was moved to a monastery in the Egyptian desert. During the 1700s it became part of the Vatican Library in Rome where it still resides. Over the centuries, it has been occasionally mentioned in various articles and books. One of the reasons that it hasn't been more widely known is that the manuscript is written in Syriac, an ancient language with fewer scholars than Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Coptic. In the 1950s it was translated into Italian - and this past year the first translation into English was published.

We don't know who wrote the *Revelation of the Magi*, or when it was written. Various clues indicate that it may have been as early as the late second century and almost certainly before the fifth century. It's an interesting story, told in the first person from the standpoint of the Magi themselves. While Matthew tells about the Magi in twelve verses, this story is about fifty pages long. It says that the Magi got that name because they prayed silently. They were members of a people who descended from Seth, the third son of Adam and Eve. They lived on the far eastern coast, at the ocean. Ever since the time of Seth, they waited expectantly for a super bright star that would signal the birth of God in human form. Finally, after thousands of years, the promised star appeared. It was so bright that the sun became as faint as the moon appeared in the daytime sky. But no one could see the star except the Magi. The star led them into a cave where it became dim and revealed that it was a small, glowing human form – a star-child, if you will. To each of the Magi, the star-child appeared slightly different. Then the star led them from the far eastern coast to Jerusalem. The star leveled the mountains and valleys, protected the Magi from wild animals, continually refilled their food sacks, and made the journey seem to take only a few moments. After the Magi met with Herod, they followed the star to Bethlehem. The star entered a cave where it ceased to be a star and became an infant that talked with the Magi and reassured them of God's love. After presenting their gifts and meeting Mary and Joseph, the Magi returned home.

So, is the *Revelation of the Magi* something that is harmful, or just fanciful or foolish? Should we study it or put it back on the shelf to gather more centuries of dust? In some ways, it seems to fill in the gaps

in Matthew's account without changing the story, much like we think of three kings, dressed in fine robes, riding camels, and arriving with the shepherds. The idea that the star was some form of God's presence, coming to be incarnate in Jesus is one that I will want to ponder and consider. The star as a luminous holy presence rather than celestial body has some appeal to me. After all, in an old gospel song we used to sing that Jesus is "the lily of the valley, the bright and morning star." It's been noted that in this ancient version of the Magi story, the star –and therefore Jesus - appeared to the Magi and spoke of appearing in other lands to other people. That sounds too universal for comfort for some readers, but we must remember that the early disciples were uncomfortable with the gospel being heard by Samaritan women, Ethiopian eunuchs, Roman centurions, and pagan Gentiles all over what is now Turkey, Greece, and Italy. Both then and now, we, the faithful, are more stingy with hospitality and love than God intends. A major lesson to be learned from the story of the Magi, whether one is reading from this newly translated text or from the Gospel according to Matthew, is that, even before Jesus reached out to the Samaritan or the Roman Centurion, even as a tiny infant, God called outsiders to come and worship the newborn king. Whether the Magi were kings or astrologers, whether they were from Persia or the Pacific coast, whether they were rich rulers or poor scholars, makes no difference. In any case, they were outsiders, gentiles, not members of the chosen people, yet still called by God.

Who, today, are the outsiders? Perhaps it's the single mother, the Asian at the Chinese restaurant, the immigrant worker, the homeless man or woman, the unemployed, or the disabled. So, bottom line, don't fret too much over this little book that never became part of recognized scripture. Just hold on to the core lesson that Jesus came for us all, and we, each and every one of us, can kneel at the manger beside the Magi, offering our gifts and worship. Amen.