

**Wise Guys – Matthew 2:1-12 – January 2, 2011**  
**The Rev. Rich Simpson, St. Francis Church, Holden**

The New Testament gives us about two *and a half* birth narratives. Mark, of course, tells us nothing at all about Jesus' birth. Luke and Matthew each give us their perspective, with different theological insights. And while John doesn't technically give us any details about the birth of Jesus, he does focus in his prologue on what it all means: "*In the beginning was the Word...*" Along the way he gives us that powerful metaphor of the light that continues to shine in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (That in itself is worth at least a half, I think!)

The fixed point in all of these stories is the Christ-child. He is the one we come to adore over these twelve days of Christmas. Taken together, these two and a half stories get us to something like a script for a pageant play. But clearly Luke dominates: everything else seems to fit in and around his story. In fact most Christmas pageants (including our own) are basically Luke's story with Matthew's wise guys tagged on to the end, as latecomers to the party, and a little bit of Johannine theology tossed in for good measure.

But there is also some benefit that comes to us from listening more attentively to each unique voice here. After all, we get four gospel writers, rather than just one, for a reason. Think of it like this: you are gathered around the family dinner table and everybody is talking at once and telling a story that everybody already knows. Each voice chimes in with part of the story: in the case of the Christmas story we hear once more about shepherds and angels and baby Jesus (no crying he makes!) and stars and wise men and donkeys and light in the darkness. It all kind of fits together.

But now imagine, for a moment, in the aftermath of all the big parties that you have a chance to sit and chat with Matthew over a cup of coffee. And imagine he leans toward you and says something like this: "look, Luke is my friend, and I know that's how he remembers it and everything. But here's what I heard..."

The Christmas season gives us an opportunity to do something like that. The Christmas Eve gospel is all Luke, with his focus on those poor and humble shepherds and the angels and archangels singing "glory to God in the highest." Although it was not nearly as crowded here last Sunday morning as it was last Friday night, a small group of us did gather together last weekend to listen to John speak about the Incarnation: *In the beginning was the Word, the Word that was with God, the Word that was God, the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, full of grace and truth.* And of course, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Today, then, it is Matthew's turn. On this second Sunday of Christmas, we are invited to listen more closely to what he has to say and to see if there isn't a Word of the Lord here for us as we begin this New Year of 2011 together. Like Luke and John, Matthew doesn't claim to have been there. He is a second-generation witness; telling a story that somebody else told him.

He begins with a genealogy that ties Jesus to King David and Father Abraham. The family tree goes through Joseph, "the husband of Mary." Along the way, four important and interesting women get named: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Matthew, the most Jewish of the four gospel writers, assumes that his readers will know the stories of those four interesting women. If you don't, then sometime when you have a chance, look them up. Just as in our own family trees, each of those people left a mark on Jesus. We may look like our mother or have a mannerism like a great uncle or musical talent like an aunt. If we use the word "wicked" and we are not talking about a Broadway

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show, we reveal something about where we come from (and it's highly unlikely that we will ever have anything nice to say about the New York Yankees.) Regardless of who Jesus' biological father is, Matthew wants to situate him in a Jewish family that traces its lineage back to David, and still further back to Abraham—each of whom in some way leaves a mark on him. (As do Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba.)

Right on the heels of that genealogy, Matthew tells us about a dream that Joseph had even before Jesus was born. If you were here two weeks ago, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, you may recall how it went: Joseph had resolved to quietly divorce Mary, but in a dream an angel tells him not to do that; but to go ahead and marry Mary and to give the child his name: Jesus.

*Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had born a son, and Joseph named him Jesus.*

So that is where we left off with Matthew two weeks ago, before his story was interrupted by Luke, and then John. Today we picked up the narrative again: “*in the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...*”

See what I mean? No angelic choirs, no shepherds, no manger, no census. Just these rather strange stargazers from the east who come looking for the child, find him, and then go home by another way. For Matthew they are not latecomers who arrived *after* those poor humble shepherds. As Matthew tells it, these goyim from the east are the first. The theological point is that they are not Jews. Jesus is revealed *to the nations*—to the Gentiles. Jesus has come into the world to make a new creation, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female: just people in it together.

The entire season of Epiphany (which this year is extra-long because Easter comes very late) is an ongoing reflection on this theme. These wise guys with their highly symbolic gifts underscore a missional point that Matthew will reiterate at the very end of his gospel: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*” (Mt. 28:19-20) The journey of the magi is about spreading the good news, sometimes with words. It's about telling the story.

The second point I want to make about these wise guys is to remind you of a metaphor that we sometimes take for granted because it is so common in the Bible. *Faith is a journey.* Like Abraham and Sarah, these magi go out, leaving behind the familiar. They follow the star to find the Christ. They are astrologers, so in that sense the star shouldn't be a surprise. The point here is not of a magic star, but that God showed them the way, just as God shows us the way. The star functions as something like “the yellow brick road.” God is the ultimate GPS system, and this story seems to be suggesting that if we, too, trust God, then our own journeys will lead us to Christ.

T. S. Eliot also reflected on this theme in his poem, “Journey of the Magi,” which I commend to you. Our mission statement at St. Francis explores this same theme and makes it explicit as our very first “core value.” *Faith is a life-long journey; it is not certainty, but trust in God. We celebrate the fact that at any given time we are at different places in that journey.*

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*We celebrate.* We don't just tolerate each other, but we celebrate one another. Ours is not a "cookie cutter" faith to which we must all conform before we are accepted. When we say that faith is a journey, we are making explicit what I think is at the core of this journey of the magi and all Biblical faith: we trust that with God's help we, too, will be lead to Christ. We have journeyed here from east and west, north and south. Some of us were shaped by Roman Catholicism and others by evangelical Christianity. Some of us like "smells and bells" and others prefer a more Quaker-esque simplicity. We recognize that our tastes may change over time, and so too, our beliefs. But what is constant is that we are on a journey and we are glad to have some traveling companions along the Way.

The third and last point that I want to make about Matthew's Christmas story is that it seems very important to him to make it clear that the magi come "*to pay Jesus homage.*" That phrase comes up three times: at the beginning, middle, and end of Matthew's story. In the middle it is Herod, not the magi, who speak these words. He is lying, of course, when he tells the magi that he wants to find the child in order to pay homage to him; in truth he wants to destroy him. (Which is why the magi have to go home by another way.) Even so, there is some irony here. The difference between wise kings and despotic ones seems to be that wise ones know their authority is derivative. They know who is really "king of kings" and "lord of lords."

Our three kings (whether or not there were three of them and whether or not they were in fact kings is not the point!) come to prostrate themselves before Jesus. They recognize Him for who he really is. Even before they offer him their gifts, the magi *pay him homage.* So it is that we dare to sing:

*As with joyful steps they sped to that lowly manger bed,  
there to bend the knee before him whom heaven and earth adore;  
so may we, with willing feet, ever seek the mercy seat.*

As we begin this New Year together and as 2011 unfolds, we also come to pay him homage. Whatever our work, whatever our calling, whether we are liberals or conservatives: we come here to bow down before Christ. We come to pay him homage. That is where we find our unity: in worship that keeps Christ at the center of our life together.

Luke's story may be the most familiar and beloved, and easily adapted for "the stage." And it's true that you can fit Matthew and John into Luke's story around the edges and it works just fine. But there is some benefit in allowing Matthew have the floor on this day and to speak in his own voice. He points us forward to the weeks and months that lie ahead, after the song of the angels is stilled and the crèche is put back into the attic and the poinsettias disappear. Matthew's Christmas story reminds us of at least three things as we begin this New Year together:

1. Christ is born not just for us, but for all the world. Our work is to share that good news at all times, sometimes even with words.
2. Faith is a journey: we don't need all the answers; just trust in God to lead us to the Christ.
3. When we find the place, Matthew reminds us that the correct response is to fall on our knees and worship this newborn king. *Come, let us adore him.*