

Jesus: Light of the World

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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EPIPHANY

Matthew 2: 1-12

Now that our new building is almost completed, our church has formed a new marketing committee. The committee has two areas of emphasis. The first, as you might guess, is revenue. Now that we have this beautiful new facility, how can we market it to the wider community so as to increase our church's yearly income? But the committee isn't talking just about money. For a moment in time our new Pilgrim Center has given us increased visibility in Sebastopol, visibility that will only increase when are newly refurbished ark returns soon. So the question becomes, what is our brand, what is important for the wider community to know about us, what makes us distinctive as a community of faith? What is our message – why come here and be a part of this church? I believe the familiar story of the journey of the wise men gives us some guidance as we consider these questions.

In Wendell Berry's novel, *Jayber Crow*, Jayber is reflecting back on his days as a seminary student. He recalls a visit to his professor of New Testament, old Dr. Ardmire. "I've got a lot of questions," said Jayber.

"Perhaps you would like to say what they are," answered the professor.

Jayber proceeded to run down the list. But even has he shared his questions he feared that this teacher would be like the other professors and discourage the asking of so many questions.

Dr. Ardmire listened thoughtfully for some time and then said, "You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out...perhaps a little at a time."

"And how long is that going to take," asked Jayber.

"I don't know. As long as you live perhaps."

"That could be a long time," replied Jayber.

"I will tell you a further mystery," said Dr. Ardmire. "It may take longer."

Matthew's story of the journey of the Wise Men has captured the imagination of artists, musicians, preachers, children and just plain church folks, even non-church folks, for centuries. So much is made of a story about which we really know so little. They were not kings – magi actually means magician or they were perhaps astrologers or astronomers. We sing about three kings but Matthew never actually tells us how many there were. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was when they arrived. As one scholar has said, it seems that every generation of Christians has added its own details from its own time and place to Matthew's story. Even the presence of the famous star has been debated. But, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "It's not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do. And stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine, or spend years in the library combing ancient texts. There is another way home. You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true."

How about it...anything in particular jump out at you, anything come to life in you, as you listened to this familiar story? Garrison Keillor wonders if at least one of the Wise Men was a Lutheran. In his words, "We think they might have been Lutheran because they brought gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Myrrh is a sort of casserole, made from macaroni and hamburger, or as they say in the Midwest – hammyrrh, thus the name. You bring it in a covered dish, hence the speculation that at least one of the Wise Men may have been one of our guys. Maybe he was going to stop at the department store and get something expensive, like gold, but his wife, a Wise Woman, said, " 'Here, take the myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish!'"

I'm not sure about the whole Lutheran thing, but one thing in the story that stands out for me, and that Keillor in his own way clearly understands, is that Matthew wants us to know that the Magi were gentiles, not Jews. They are foreigners from the East – Persia, Babylon, Arabia? – who have come into the heartland of Judaism to worship this new king. Outsiders, not one of us, kneeling before the Christ child and offering their gifts. Who is

welcome in Bethlehem? It would seem that all are welcome; all are invited. Jesus is still an infant and already religious and cultural boundaries are being broken. Could there be a message here that we want to convey to our wider community? Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is the Light of the whole world, not just one church or one particular theological point of view or one particular people. The light shines for all to see and you just never know who might decide to follow. It would behoove us to make sure that all our doors open outward, ready for outsiders who come bearing their own unique gifts. In the words of one colleague, "God's compelling hospitality constantly regenerates the family of faith." The story compels us to ask if we can be the church of extravagant welcome and hospitality.

And one other thing in this story that jumps out at me. The Wise Men make a pit stop in Jerusalem, at the court of King Herod. They need some details about where this new King might be found whose star they have followed for so many miles. And the King and his advisors have two responses. First....fear. After all, if the Wise Men are looking for a new King of the Jews, what does that say about the old King of the Jews, i.e. Herod? There's room for only one king in this town! The powers that be are a little shaky when confronted by this birth.

And they are also ignorant. Herod's second response to the inquiry of the Wise Men is to convene a little Bible study. He calls together his own group of wise men – religious officials, scribes, scholars to determine where this new king might be born. There is a fascinating irony at the heart of this story. The religious insiders, the established religious and political authorities, who knew the law, knew the scriptures, don't get it. They know all there is to know about religion and church, but are unable or unwilling to welcome the Messiah. Again, it is the outsiders, the seekers, the journeyers, the questioners who see the truth.

We are back to Jayber Crow and the the importance of the journey, of the questions that may take a lifetime or more finally to be answered. We live in a part of the world that sees itself as the land of spiritual seekers, a place filled with people who resist the idea – distrust the idea - that there is only one truth. But how about us and our church? Do we feel we have arrived, have reached our destination, have all the truth and faith we need? Or, like Jayber Crow, like those wise men, are we still on a journey, still will to ask and entertain questions?

The Wise Men followed a star – away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, away from the reputations they had built for themselves, away from certainty toward the unknown, each one of them journeying with nothing but a star in his eye. And us? Are we willing to follow a star, to relinquish our sense of sense of comfort and control and go to where the star, and its Lord, may choose to lead us? And can we as a church rise with this shining new star, rise to a new sense of adventure, forsake our cozy boundaries and certainties, and go forth? In the words of William Willimon, "Perhaps that's a chief requirement for being a Christian – a willingness to go on a journey. Alas, I fear that too many of us settle in, settle down, as if church were the end of the journey with God rather than its beginning. Yet we follow a living Lord, who leads us forward, in whose service is high adventure." What do you say? Perhaps the message of this familiar story to us and our message to our community is this...with hopeful imaginations, open minds and trusting hearts, let's dare to follow the star.