

Homily: “Kings and Fools”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 3, 2021 – Second Sunday after Christmas - Epiphany
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

From afar, they came looking for a newly born king, and they themselves were three kings: Melchior, a king from Persia; Gaspar, a king from India; and Balthazar, a king from Arabia. These three kings came riding on camels in the night, bearing treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Or at least that’s how the story is often remembered each year in pageants and crèche scenes such as ours here.

Like so many of our traditions, the image in our minds of the story of the magi is like a giant snowball that has come to rest at the bottom of a hill. It started out as a small snowball on top of the hill, but once it started rolling, it grew bigger and bigger, picking up some random trees here, and a few rocks there, and it became something quite different altogether than what it was originally.

In the gospel according to Matthew, which is the only place in our scriptures where the magi are mentioned, these characters were described simply as magi from the east. Over the years, we gave them names and countries of origin, made them wise men and kings, and even gave them bones, which are today housed in a shrine in Cologne, Germany.

But in the gospel, we are told simply that they were an unnumbered, unnamed group of magi from the east. Magi, is a plural name, originally from Persia, for priestly, star-gazing, dream-reading, sorcerer types. Our English word magic comes from magi, and this is a good way to think of them: They were mysterious and magical (we know a little

about magic here in Stoneham as we have our own park for unicorns! And what is more magical than unicorns?).

When the magi came in to Palestine, they certainly would not have been considered by the Jewish people living there to be kings or wise men. In all of the literature of Jewish people from the time of Jesus as well as centuries before and since, magi, in fact, were thought of as fools--powerless, silly, and completely misguided fools.

The people in Israel had their own guiding star in their scriptures, which was given to them by God through their prophets, who were unique in being the true truth-tellers and wise ones. And so when the star-gazing foreigners came to Jerusalem, seeking to pay homage to a new-born king, they were not taken so seriously by the Jewish scribes and religious leaders, who considered themselves to be the only ones with true knowledge and divine insight.

Wiley Herod did rightly surmise that the king that the magi were seeking was not to be found in his own palace, but was the Messiah, or Christ in Greek--the one anointed of God in the line of King David, who, like David, would be a military conqueror and hero. And so he learned from the scribes and priests where their scriptures said this Messiah would be from, which was the tiny hamlet of Bethlehem, David's hometown, just six miles to the south of Jerusalem. But the scribes and priests did not take the magi seriously, for they were just star-gazing fools from afar, and so had no desire themselves to go to Bethlehem or even think again about the incident.

Old King Herod, however, saw things differently. Herod the Great was appointed by the Romans as king over the Jews, but he himself was not Jewish or from Judea; rather, he was an Idumean from south of Judea. Herod was notorious for his heavy taxation to support his lavish lifestyle and colossal building projects. He was great in this way, but

like so many of the other “great” rulers of history, he was not at all good. Herod was renowned for his tyrannical rule and brutality, and had those considered a threat to his rule assassinated or executed, including a wife, three sons, two brothers-in-law, and a mother-in-law. According to a later Roman account, Caesar Augustus claimed that “It is better to be Herod’s pig, than his son” (and you thought our national politics were rough and tumble!). Herod ruled with an iron fist and destroyed anyone and anything threatening his tight grip on power, including, especially, anyone who could be a Messiah, a rival king.

And so Herod acted when the magi came to into town with their story of a star rising in the east, which meant to them that a new king was born. He secretly tried to get the magi to do the work of locating the spot where he could find this potential rival, so that he could quickly and quietly vanquish the threat. But God spoke to the dream-discerning magi, and they thwarted Herod’s dastardly plan by leaving for their own land without returning a report to the king.

But before they did so, they followed the star to the place where young Jesus was. Being overwhelmed with joy, they bowed down and laid before him precious gifts fit for a king. The magi, who neither bowed down before the great king Herod, nor offered him tribute, saw this humble child, baby Jesus, as the true ruler of the people to whom they were sent.

We have in this amazing story’s actors contrasting responses to God’s message. In the religious leaders of Jerusalem, we have arrogance, disbelief, and indifference. In Herod, we have fear, greed, and deceit. But in the magi, considered to be foreign fools, we find an eagerness to find God’s message and faithfulness and joy in acting upon it. The magi were no fools at all!

And we can learn from their wisdom. We can pay attention to the voice of the still-speaking God as they did. For God spoke to them in their own language, in stars and dreams, and God speaks to us—each of us—in our own language, whatever that might be. We can be vigilant for these messages of God, as the magi were when they scanned the skies, seeking signs from the heavens. We can be like them in being open to receiving these messages and paying attention to them. And we can be like them in responding to God’s message by taking bold action, doing what God calls us to do, even when that requires embarking upon difficult journeys or offering costly treasures.

So in this new year, as we consider the lessons learned from the year behind us and peer ahead and ponder what may be, let us commit ourselves to embracing these wise ways of the magi and so to create a brighter, more blessed, joyous future, where the reign of Christ grows in our hearts and brings more goodness to all creation! Amen.