

“Called to Gift”

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The Epiphany of the Lord**

Matthew 2:1-12

January 1, 2012

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12

Today is New Year's Day, an old year has been ushered out and a new one was welcomed in with parties, socializing, champagne, a rendering of Auld Lang Syne and the traditional New Year's Eve kiss. Of course, I know some of you skipped the parties, the singing and the kiss, and just went to bed as usual! Meanwhile, an estimated one million people attended the festivities last night in Times Square.

But New York's not the only city with a New Year's splash to welcome the New Year. Other cities have created their own object-dropping traditions: In Atlanta, GA, they drop a giant peach. In Eastport, ME, its a sardine. Over in Ocean City, MD, they drop an enormous beach ball, and in Mobile, AL, they drop a 600-pound electric Moon Pie. The good folks in Tempe, AZ, watch a giant tortilla chip as it descends into a massive bowl of salsa. In Brasstown, NC they drop a Plexiglas pyramid containing a live possum and in Key West, FL, they drop an enormous ruby slipper with a drag queen inside it.¹ Oh my ...

I

Garrison Keillor had a Christmas show a few years back where he imagined the wise men as university professors. They were the “Assistant Wise Man,” the “Associate Wise Man” and the “Chairman of the Department of Wisdom.” What made this fun was knowing Keillor was spoofing the differences between “knowledge” and “wisdom.” In his own unique way, he was picking a bone with our cultural worship at the throne of the academy without valuing wisdom.

Most of us recognize education itself does not guarantee wisdom. Any graduate school is proof of that. One can go through the rigors of graduate school, no matter the discipline, and still not be considered “wise.” One can know all there is to know about a particular body of knowledge and still be the biggest fool around.

Today we're celebrating Epiphany! It's the day celebrated by the church as that occasion when the travelers, those we call “wise men,” from the east visited the baby whose arrival was foretold in the stars. These stargazers had read by the constellations of the night sky that a child had been born who would become the king of the Jews.

Like any good evangelist, Matthew has an agenda as he writes. He tells us about Jesus and the buzz that was set loose in the whole of creation just because he was born. But Matthew

¹ Garrison Keillor, *The Writer's Almanac*, American Public Media, St. Paul MN, 12/31/11

tells us also about the fascination of the stargazers and the fear and anxiety of a politician. And in the end, like any good writer, he tells us about ourselves, whether he meant to or not.²

II

Christian tradition claims that magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem on the 12th day after Jesus' birth. Calling them "magi" has historically been translated to mean that they were "wise men." We might be better served to call them astrologers than wise men. But don't be fooled by that. It may be the star that led them there, but it was their good sense of wisdom that saved them from being Herod's political pawns.

When the magi paid their courtesy call to Herod, he tried his best to sneak it by them that he had an honest interest in this "sweet little boy." In truth, Herod was "a conniving old fox," as the Jews referred to him behind his back. Herod was a true politician, an inside-the-beltway believer, unmatched for his cruel trickery and political savvy. But when Herod realized his attempt to solicit the cooperation of the magi had failed, he ordered the slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of two.

The wise men came to the spot where the child lay and they were overwhelmed by the immensity of the truth that lay before them in the crib. Matthew tells us "they worshiped." They saw the star and followed. When they arrived at the sacred place where Jesus lay, they were apprehended by the immensity of the truth before their eyes.

The Bible seems to be telling us that these wise men from the East, believed to be the first Gentiles to understand the global nature of this child's power to save, dropped to their knees and worshiped him. What a powerful image that puts in our minds! Not being of the tribe of Abraham, these outsiders discovered in their hearts that this child could be the focus of their hopes and dreams.

III

Herod's political fear and paranoia stands in contrast to the Wise Men. The difference might be seen as the difference between being "wise" and simply being "clever." A wise person is someone who recognizes that life is not merely to be comprehended, but a life that is to be apprehended. It is to realize that one can give him/herself to something grand worthy of one's best.

A few days before Elie Wiesel was to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, he was interviewed in Stockholm where he said, "There are truths that the mind indeed grasps, but there are other truths, more important truths, before which human beings can only bow down."

Ironically, a few days later he stood on the stage to receive his prize but he could barely be heard because he had lost his voice. Wiesel had been "the voice of those without a voice," in

² Burt Burlison, "The Maniac and the Magi," DaySpring Baptist Church, 1/5/02

that he spoke in the years following World War II about the Holocaust and thus gave voice to all those who had died in the Death Camps. Ironically, he became speechless, almost as if he had predicted it, because, as he claimed, “the mystery was so overwhelming.”

No matter how you take this story, the magi proved the difference between wisdom and cleverness. Another dream warned them to slip out the back and leave Herod to his own devices. Matthew tells us simply, “They went home by another way.” In other words, the magi were led in by a star and led out by their sense of wisdom.

How does God best lead you? What is that “other way” that you know in your heart might be the way of escape from some troublesome problem you face today? You’ve tried trickery. You’ve tried getting by on your cleverness. You’ve tried all that your human resources tell you might deliver you but you haven’t paid attention to that inner voice that calls you from the source of divine wisdom.

Maybe it’s time to listen to what your heart would call common sense. Maybe it’s time to “go home by another way,” to choose the brave path in life, to make the uncommon commitment that goes against the grain of what others might suggest for you.

The stargazers paid attention to the sign given them and pondered what it meant to them. They assumed it was a sign, like any good spirit-driven person would do. They connected the dots and then followed them. Call it synchronicity, or call it providence, call it fate if you wish ... but understand that the events of your life are often the way the Divine leads you and wants you to follow the path where the sign leads you.