

“Homage” GPPC 1-6-19
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

About twenty years ago, I was visiting someone at the Presbyterian Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The visit was over and I was leaving the parking deck. I gave my ticket to the parking attendant to be validated. And the attendant said, “Hey reverend, I’ve got a joke for ya.” “Oh, okay,” I said, thinking about the poor guy waiting in line behind me. The attendant said, “A man went to a church to ask for some food. And the pastor met him and said, ‘I’ll give you something to eat, but first you have to tell me where Jesus was born.’ And the man said, ‘Well, I’m not sure. Was it Philadelphia?’ ‘No,’ said the pastor. ‘Well, was it Pittsburgh?’ ‘No,’ said the pastor. ‘How about Altoona?’ asked the man. ‘No, that’s not it either’ answered the pastor. ‘Oh, I can’t remember. I give up,’ said the man. ‘It was Bethlehem,’ said the pastor. ‘Jesus was born in Bethlehem.’ ‘Shoot!’ said the man, ‘I *knew* it was *somewhere* in Pennsylvania!’”

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The Bible is ancient and familiar at the same time. So we tend to have misconceptions about it that arise from jumping to conclusions or from mixing in legend with the biblical text.

I think one of you told me about one of your little girls (now a grown woman) who got into a big argument with the pastor during the children's sermon many years ago. As I recall, your child insisted that there were *three* wise men. The pastor said that the Bible does not actually say how many wise men there were; it just says they brought three gifts for Jesus. But oddly enough, this argument was not persuasive to your little girl who will, no doubt, join a long line of smart, strong-willed Presbyterian women.

Someone recently asked me how old Jesus was when the "wise men" visited. He had heard various theories, but, again, the Bible itself does not say.

By the way, what were the names of the "wise men"? Maybe you're ready to say Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. But what does the Bible actually say? Nothing.

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With all of the misconceptions and legend surrounding the visit of “the wise men,” maybe we could clear away some of the misunderstanding and discover some divine light as we live into the New Year.

Matthew begins by placing the story in history, “In the time of King Herod...” he says. Most likely this “King” was Herod the Great, who was *not* actually a king; he was a lower-ranking official, a tetrarch who ruled over Palestine on behalf of the Roman Empire. He was part of the Herod family infamous for its cunning and brutality in the pursuit of power and privilege. As one scholar said of Herod the Great, “. . . he was known as a moody, cruel, and sometimes violent ruler, who often imprisoned or executed even members of his own family.” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 17.)

Otherwise, a real charmer.

And who were these “wise men from the East” who came to Jerusalem looking for the child born “king of the Jews”?

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These “wise men” were Magi who may have been astrologers or magicians (the Bible experts are not completely certain). But the deeper question is what the Magi represent. They were Gentiles, not Jews, for one thing. They also had some prestige and wealth. And they were searching for the “king of the Jews,” searching not by means of some instruction from Holy Scripture but by a sign from the natural world, by the leading of a star.

So Luke reminds us that the blue collar shepherds showed up for the birth of Jesus. But Matthew reminds us that also the wealthy, the prestigious, and the spiritual searchers outside our mother faith of Judaism also went looking for Jesus. And they too finally showed up.

As our country becomes less and less Christian and more dominated by people of other faiths or who claim to have no faith or who claim they are spiritual but not religious, how might the visit of the Magi speak to us? Maybe it reminds us that spiritual seekers might still come looking for Jesus. How might we engage them? How might we

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refuse to water down our faith, yet practice Christian hospitality with them? You never know who might show up, you know.

And why did the Magi search and finally show up anyway? To pay Jesus “homage.” The New Testament word for homage means to fall on one’s face, “to throw oneself down to the ground as a sign of devotion or humility, before high-ranking persons or divine beings...” (*BDAG*) In other words, the Magi were traveling so that they might worship Jesus.

And we have traveled today so that we might worship the God we know in Jesus too.

Well, King Herod heard about their search. And Matthew says he was frightened. The Greek word here means to be troubled, terrified, confused, shaken. As Elvis sang, King Herod was “all shook up.” But Jesus was still a child. So why was King Herod afraid anyway? What was he all shook up about?

The same things that all evil rulers and evil leaders are afraid of—goodness, love, justice, mercy, truth, people who hold them accountable, and finally the ultimate justice and judgment of God. Maybe Herod was

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afraid of all those things, as much as he was threats to his power. With the coming of Jesus, Herod faced the threat of truth to counter his lies. And he faced the fact that the real sovereign of the world had been born, and he was *out there* somewhere. So Herod was afraid, as evil rulers typically are afraid.

But Matthew also says that “all Jerusalem” was frightened with Herod. Why? Maybe because the people had become used to the oppression they experienced. Maybe they had learned to lower their expectations and how to manage their misery. And they feared a new kind of misery, instead of living in hope of something and someone better.

And how are you and I living in this New Year? Are we content to lower our expectations and live with misery we’ve become accustomed to? Or do we live in hope of something and someone better? Do we live into a new reality?

As so often happens when people, especially terrible leaders, are afraid, King Herod turned to lies and later to violence. “Go and search

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diligently for the child,” he told the Magi, “And when you’ve found him, let me know, so I may also go and pay him homage.”

So the Magi went, following the star. And when they found the child, Jesus, with his mother, they were absolutely overwhelmed with joy. And they knelt and paid him homage. And Matthew recalls this strange scene. The men opened their treasure chests and offered the child gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Can you imagine this child, maybe even a baby (we don’t know), with gold, frankincense, and myrrh scattered around him? What was he going to do with this stuff? “Geez,” said Mary. “We were expecting new socks or a doll or a Nerf football. But *this*?” Why the gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

Matthew is saying that these wealthy and prestigious people brought Jesus the most expensive and the very best gifts they could come up with. They did not give Jesus the scraps of their lives. They gave him the best they could.

And what are we giving him? Are we giving him the best we can too?

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And then instead of reporting to Herod so that he and his henchmen might pay a *friendly* visit to Jesus, the Magi were warned in a dream (by God, we assume) not to go back. So, as James Taylor sang, “They went home by another way.”

What might Matthew be telling us in this odd story? At least three things.

First, the birth of Jesus is the continued unveiling of God’s loving plan to redeem the world. Jesus is not born just so we’ll have a cute story to tell at Christmas. He’s born because God is determined to be with us on this earth in every moment and to free us from everything that makes life less good and human and wondrous.

Second, his birth provokes some fear and resistance from us all, but especially from those who’re involved in oppression in order to maintain power over others. But in this Jesus God is on the move. So resistance is futile. And the invitation from God to us is to let down our defenses and allow God to lead us.

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Third, the Magi show us there is a right way to respond to this birth, and that is to pay homage to Christ. Like the Magi, we know the right way to respond to Christ is with our joyful worship and with our grateful lives.

So this New Year have you and I made some resolutions? I've made a few--typical stuff—be less anxious and more trusting, eat more healthy food, exercise more consistently, sleep more, make some friends, and so on. Have you made some New Year's resolutions?

But what about some resolutions about our life as Christians? How about following the example of the Magi? How about resolving to live more gratefully and to worship more joyfully and more regularly? Praying and reading the Bible daily? Giving more generously? Finding at least one way to serve God in the church and in the world?

Think about it and pray about it this week. How might you and I follow the example of the Magi with our spiritual lives in 2019? Living in gratitude to God and paying homage, worshiping the God we know in Jesus, and bringing the best we have. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal