

“THE WISE MEN COMETH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, First Sunday After Epiphany, January 9, 2021

In the mid-1200s the famous Venetian explorer Marco Polo traveled from his native Italy to the fabled Far East where few westerners had ever gone before. Going first by boat to the Near East, he then traveled overland through Persia, which we today know as Iran, on the second leg of his journey to China. As he later recorded in his celebrated book on his travels, Marco Polo encountered in the remote Persian city of Sava the final resting place of three Wise Men who paid homage to Jesus at Bethlehem. At least that was what was locally claimed by Sava’s residents. Based on what he personally saw or was told, Polo wrote in his best-selling account: “In that city are buried the three, in separate tombs, above which is a square house carefully preserved.” He added: “Their heads are still entire, with their hair and their beards. One was named Balthazar, the other Gaspar, the third Melchior...”

Marco Polo’s report must have come as a shock and disappointment to the citizens of both Milan, Italy and Cologne, Germany. Since the ninth century, both European cities had competitively asserted that their own magnificent cathedrals were the repositories for the bones of the three Wise Men--religious bounty brought back by knights and soldiers from one of the early Christian crusades to the Holy Land where Jesus was born. As holy relics, the Wise Men’s bones had long drawn thousands of pilgrims each year to those who wanted to be close to those who had been close to Christ. It was lucrative for the cathedrals, which welcomed pilgrim offerings.

Today, though we live in a more skeptical age, especially when it comes to the authenticity of relics, the Cologne Cathedral still maintains a shrine for the bones of the three kings. You can see the shrine with your own eyes if you ever visit the Cologne Cathedral. Meanwhile, those tombs that Marco Polo encountered at Sava in Persia? They have apparently disintegrated and disappeared. All of which leaves us a big puzzle perhaps worthy of the History Channel. Exactly where do the real bones of the three Wise Men rest—if they survive at all?

Of course, that’s not only mystery that enshrouds the fabled kinds of Jesus’ nativity story. In fact, there are many claims about the wise men that also remain points of controversy. Consider this prime example. At different times the Wise Men who followed Bethlehem’s star to the stable and manger where Jesus lay have been differently numbered and named. Up until the third century, A.D., which is chronologically a lot closer to the actual birth of Christ than we are, the head count on the wise men fluctuated wildly. While some sources insisted that there were only ever two wise men, others maintained that there had been at least twelve. The Presbyterian minister Henry Van Dyke, who was also American diplomat to the Near East, took the

opportunity of the uncertainty and confusion about actual wise men numbers to compose his own now-cherished story about a fourth wise man who belatedly arrives at Bethlehem, joining the others. Our popular conviction that there were three and only three Wise Men eventually won out simply because no more than three gifts are mentioned in Matthew's gospel--namely, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (*Matthew 2:11*)

Under the circumstances should we be surprised that that the Wise Men's names varied considerably from place to place? According to an Ethiopian source, they were to be known as Hor, Basanter, and Karsudan. However, inspired by an Old Testament psalm which prophesizes that the kings of Sheba and Seba will bring gifts to the messiah and all kings will "fall down before him, all nations serve him," an ancient Near Eastern source identified the three Bethlehem Wise Men as earthly monarchs and rulers come to acclaim Jesus' superior spiritual authority in heaven and on earth. (*Psalms 72:10*) Elaborating only a little on the Bible, the same source named the Bethlehem visitors as Hormizdah, King of Persia; Yazdegerd, King of Saba; and Perozadh, King of Sheba.

It was a sixth century A.D. Greek or western Christian source which, returning to the notion of Jesus' visitors as sages or Wise Men, rather than royal personages, named them as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. Thereafter, Gaspar was also called Caspar, which is more familiar today.

It seems a lot more time elapsed before the individual identities of the three Wise Men were literally and figuratively fleshed out with fuller descriptions beyond what little the Bible had to suggest. In the fresh reckonings of the Christian Churches, Melchior was said to be a "man with white hair...and a long beard." Gaspar or Caspar was not only supposed to be younger, but also beardless and ruddy complexioned. Balthasar was African and beautifully black-skinned with a heavy beard.

To their gifts were imputed special meaning. The gold that Melchior carried was imagined to be his acknowledgment of Jesus as "King of Kings." The frankincense which Gaspar brought, then commonly burned as a fragrance to honor pagan gods, was an implicit witness to Christ's divinity. In turn, Balthasar's myrrh possessed more somber symbolism since it was a spice widely used to embalm and perfume the dead. Here then was a prediction that this innocent baby in Mary's arms would one day confront death for us all.

At the Cologne Cathedral, which claimed the Wise Men's bones, the legend grew up that Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar were among Christianity's early converts. They were said to have been baptized at some point by the Apostle Thomas, known to have traveled furthest as a missionary from the Holy Land, ultimately reaching distant coastal India. For their own part, wherever in the Near East the Wise Men ended up after their return from

Bethlehem, they were credited with proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the Catholic Church remembers them as full-fledged bishops, offering important leadership.

Poignant is the claim that the three Wise Men actually enjoyed at least one glad reunion together. According to a *Calendar of the Saints* published by the Cologne Cathedral, the Wise Men met up from their different homes for the Feast of Christmas in 54 A.D. in the Armenian town of Sebaste. Not long afterwards each supposedly died—all within a few days of one another, either during the last days of the Christmas season or the early days of Epiphany, a season symbolized by the star they followed. If the legend is to be believed, Melchior's passing came first on January 1, the eighth day of Christmas. In an era when life expectancy was short, he was said to have attained the great age of 116 years. Meanwhile, Balthasar is reputed to have followed Melchior in death at age 112 on January 6. Coincidentally or not, this is the date commemorated by our Christian Churches as "Three Kings Day," which arrived last Thursday. Apparently, Gaspar or Caspar only lived a few days longer, passing from this life on January 11, the sixth day of Epiphany, at age 109. Looking to the spiritual example of Israel's great patriarchs, earlier generations of Christian believers saw the longevity of the wise men as clear evidence of their exemplary sanctity and holiness and began acknowledging them as saints.

Not surprisingly, at a time when so many stand ready to debunk myths and legends, especially of the more fanciful kind, there is today no shortage of scholars and commentators ready to opine on the various stories of the three Wise Men. In our 21st Century, their speculation has been the Wise Men were probably astrologers, rather than philosophers or kings. Moreover, the Biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown has suggested that the Wise Men may have originated from northeastern Syria, west of the Tigris and east of the Euphrates Rivers, which has a history of both Persian and Greek influences. It was an area well-known for its practice of astrology, which was considered a science in the ancient world. Complex horoscopes predicting the birth of kings have been found in archaeological digs in that part of Syria, since devastated by Civil War. Moreover, the Apostle Matthew, who is the only gospel writer to mention the Wise Men and their gifts, probably lived closest to that particular neck of the woods.

Yet, even as Biblical scholar Raymond Brown concedes, the present-day nations of Iraq, Iran, and Jordan remain alternative candidates for the native lands from whence the Wise Men came. Iran or Persia was long the odds-on favorite only because Marco Polo in his earlier mentioned travelogue contended that the Wise Men had originated there. And artists of his day liked the exoticism of that Persian identity which made it possible for them to dress up the Wise Men in lively and vivid costumes for their art work.

Significantly, in 339 A.D., the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, supposedly built on the same spot where Jesus' rude birthplace once stood, commissioned an elaborate

mosaic depicting the Wise Men in Persian dress. In an interesting twist, an invading Persian Army three centuries later (614, A.D.), laid waste to the rest of Bethlehem but left the Church of the Nativity unharmed because it recognized their own native countrymen in the wall mosaic.

Whatever their particular national origin might have been, it is widely conceded among today's scholars that the Wise Men probably started out as followers of an ancient religion named Zoroastrianism which was prominent and widespread across the Near East before the rise of either Christianity or Islam. Zoroastrian priests or *magi*, as they were also called, were much-admired for their star-reading skills. Many Zoroastrian *magi* served foreign kings and powers. The Old Testament Book of Genesis recalls that several Zoroastrian *magi* served in the court of the Egyptian pharaoh during the time the Patriarch Joseph's own rise to power there. (*Genesis 41:8*) Likewise, as told in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, the Moabite King Balak had his own court *magus* (singular for *magi*) named Balaam who ended up inadvertently blessing the Jewish people even though he had first set out to curse them. (*Numbers 22:11-12*) Additionally, Balaam prophesized that that a star would come forth from the descendants of the Jewish patriarch Jacob. (*Numbers 24:17*)

If the Wise Men venturing the four hundred miles from their original homes to Bethlehem were Zoroastrian *magi* as now so widely presumed, they had good cause beyond personal curiosity to follow the star. Their own founding prophet Zoroaster, who is believed to have lived two hundred years before Jesus was born, had predicted the coming of a divine savior for the whole world whose birth would be announced by a star.

All in all, while it's nice to think of the *magi* as ultimate converts to Christianity, as earlier Christians believed, there may be worthwhile message for our world today in the fact they started out as Zoroastrians and with their magnificent astrological skills were actually considered the scientists of their era. That message is this: what Jesus proclaimed through birth, life, death, and resurrection of his first coming and the salvation he makes possible for us as God's son are relevant to all peoples, whatever their professed religion, however they may stand in faith now. Likewise, Jesus' teachings also transcend our stubborn 21st century divide between science and religion which makes too many scientists atheists. In fact, the gospel of Jesus Christ has powerful guidance to impart to the most technically oriented, fact-minded scientists who need moral and spiritual grounding too so that their work doesn't become selfish, monstrous, and destructive.

Yet there is a flip side to all this that we should also note as Christians. In Matthew's recounting of the events at Bethlehem, the Wise Men *are* still non-Christians, as well as the scientists of their age. Nevertheless, they stand up and stand out as people of moral

integrity and goodwill--idealistic and generous too. Before they ever convert to the Christian faith we hold dear, they despise evil and recognize it in a viciously power-hungry King Herod who, after showing them royal hospitality, invites them to become his personal informants. (*Matthew 2:3-8*) When the homage and gift-giving of the Wise Men is done, the God we worship actually ratifies whatever suspicions the three already harbor towards Herod. God warns them in a dream to stay away from the diabolical Herod, who will soon issue an order for the murder of every male Jewish child under the age of two. (*Matthew 2:16*) The Wise Men have the good sense to listen in their dream to the God who sent Jesus into our midst. Obediently, they take another route home. (*Matthew 2:12*).

All this should bring to mind for us Jesus' words in his subsequent ministry where he declares that "Those who are not against us are with us." (*Mark 9:40*) Although our own personal commitment to Jesus Christ is supreme, we should never discount the virtue of those beyond our own faith community, who can be our allies and partners in the good. God can speak to them. He can make use of their talents and gifts for the benefit of his own greater purposes that we are all called to honor. Indeed, the appearance of the Wise Men at Bethlehem is a harbinger and foreshadowing of a widening salvation community that Jesus clearly anticipated when he declared that "Many will come from East and West and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (*Matthew 8:11*)

The late Leonard Weigel, who pastored this church many decades back, was fond of calling the Wise Men "the wise guys." It was all light-heartedened with no disrespect meant. The Wise Men were truly "wise men" in the best sense of those two words. And if any of us want to be wise guys and wise gals we are well served to pay homage to Jesus and follow in his teachings and ways, always deepening our commitment and devotion.

Yes, the Christmas season is over. Epiphany has begun. But let us in the wisdom that comes from both studied knowledge and faith, which are never out of season, continue to bring our own gifts and talents to the ministry of Jesus Christ, worshipping him as the savior for all whom God has revealed him to be. **Amen.**