

The story of the magi's visit has to be one of the top ten most familiar and beloved stories of all Christian scripture. Matthew's story conjures memories of Christmas pageants with children in their bathrobes playing shepherds and kings with cardboard crowns and the baby Jesus played by a 60-watt lightbulb. Matthew's story has captured the imagination of poets like T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats and Longfellow. Botticelli, Fra Angelico, da Vinci and Rembrandt have each rendered their interpretations into timeless classic paintings. Even James Taylor and Garrison Keillor have based songs and poems on this story.

Matthew's magi have inspired so very much, but it is a story about which we actually know so very little. We don't really know how many of them there were. Matthew never tells us. Second century sources suggest two visitors, but later Medieval sources list twelve. St. Bede, an English Benedictine monk, was the first to name and describe the three in the early 8th century.

Bede portrayed one of them, Melchior, as "an old man with white hair and a long beard." Another, Balthasar, Bede described as "black-skinned and heavily bearded while the third, Gaspar, was "young and beardless and ruddy complexioned." Bede also interpreted the three gifts: gold represented a gift appropriate for a king, while frankincense symbolized an oblation worthy of divinity, and myrrh, a burial herb, testified to the Son of Man who was to die¹.

The magi were, of course, not kings at all. They were astrologers, most likely pagan Arabs from what is now Jordan or Saudi Arabia, or perhaps as far south as Yemen. Recent cultural anthropology studies suggest that all three gifts were actually different forms of incense—"gold" being a reference to incense burned only on the golden altar that sat in front of the curtain to the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple. We have no idea how long it took them to get to where Jesus was; we don't know whether the "star" was a comet or a constellation, or whether they saw a light *before* Jesus was born or two years *after* his birth.

Hard facts evade our best efforts. Archeology has shed a little light on some possibilities. The social sciences have offered some provocative insights. Scholarly studies of ancient texts provide a bit more clarity. Verifiable facts swirl tantalizingly just beyond our reach.

¹ Brown, Raymond E. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977

And yet there *is* truth in the story, is there not? Fr. Paul, one of my seminary professors, used to say that “Scripture is true. And some of it happened.” You see, facts do matter, but historical or scientific accuracy is not what the ancients were trying to capture in scripture. Our ancestors in the faith were seeking to convey the spiritual truth of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having been utterly convinced of the truth of their experience of Christ, they presented scripture intended to capture their reflections and understanding in ways that they hoped would transmit that conviction.

They show us, in other words, another way home. Whether we refer to this reading as “the three wise men,” “the three kings” or “the adoration of the magi,” *all that* stands beside the truth that the story conveys, which is this: that the grace and love of God appeared in Jesus Christ. God so loves us that God has entered into the boundaries of our life. This is the story of the blessed journey of every person who seeks God from whatever place they start. Today is the feast day of every person who responds to the arising of a light in the darkness by seeking God because it is God who seeks them first.

As heart-warming as the sweetness of children’s Christmas pageants can be, the adult version is also a heart-warming story. The difference is that the story that captures *more truth* is about a quiet, gentle light arising in the dark of ruthless power and infanticide. A light that is found first by the “wrong” people—foreigners. But the arrival of these Arab pagans is true evidence of the considerable reach of God’s loving embrace. There is no longer insider and outsider. This is not a new theme in Judaism, but it is a new chapter in the story of God’s promise to bless Abraham so that he and all his children may, in turn, become a blessing to the world. That promise is unfolding further and in this story it is happening by way of astrology.

All too often, our answer to other ways of experiencing God’s light arising in the darkness is reactionary. If we lose sight of Matthew’s story, we can react impulsively to those whose faith is different than ours instead of considering the possibility that God brings other people into the light of God’s love through what may feel *to us* like insufficient or alien forms of faith.

The adult version of Matthew’s nativity moves quickly from the tender adoration of the magi back into the darkness of political deception and fear-induced violence. But this version is also realistic and we need to hear even the darkest parts of it because we, too, live in a world riddled by fear, a world tormented by extremist hatred and violence—a world that, now more than ever, calls for the need for interreligious dialogue. We live in a world in which 40,000 children die every day of starvation and preventable diseases. We live in

a country where 297 people are shot every day. So you see, the adult version of Matthew's story of the magi and the subsequent slaughter of the innocents in the verses that follow render an accurate, if painfully raw, picture of the world.

But as upsetting as it is to contemplate, the darkness is what makes the story of the magi far more astonishing and all the more relevant. At the heart of Matthew's darker, more adult-oriented story is the light of God's promise. God's promise to be with us in a world so controlled by fear that we do the unthinkable to each other or we allow it to happen.

This is precisely the world that God continues to come into even as God came into the world once in a baby—Emmanuel, “God with us”—Jesus the Christ, the Word that God gave to live and die as one of us in part so that the world may come to know God in Christ. But also so that all people may come to know and experience what it means to be fully human, the created image of God.

The magi came to see the Christ-child and to give him gifts intended for a king. Not goat's milk and a warm blanket fit for a peasant baby, but gestures of honor for a new king of Judea. Did they bring the wrong gifts? Did they find the child by the wrong method? Were they the wrong people?

I think not. It seems that the author of Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, is aware from the opening lines that it is not necessary first to have Jewish heritage or scriptural awareness before one can journey toward the light of God. The magi are our example of God's promise that those who seek in the darkness will find God's light. Matthew's story is evidence that the yearnings even of those who do not know fully what they seek are met in the act of God at Bethlehem. Whoever these travelers were, they disappeared from scripture as quickly and quietly as they came. But in pouring out the very last drop of their hearts for the light they encountered, they found their true homes.

The 19th c. French Jesuit, Fr. Jean Pierre de Caussade, wrote this: “If you truly seek this treasure, this kingdom where God alone reigns, you will find it. Your heart, if it is totally surrendered to God, is itself this treasure, that very kingdom you long for and are seeking.”²

The light that shines in the contrasting dark of Matthew's magi story can be a homing beacon for you and me. Now, in this time of grim shadow, is not the time for us to fear or correct other ways to respond to God's light with love. Instead, it is more important than ever for us to turn *our* eyes toward Christ so

² Caussade, Jean Pierre de, and Kitty Muggerridge. *Sacrament of the Present Moment*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2009.

that God can make us carriers and messengers of God's light and love; God's forgiveness, justice and hope.

I wonder if Matthew didn't sketch this story in shadier tones precisely so that we might perceive the glory and grace of God's redemption in Christ all the more clearly—like a bright star shining high in the night sky that leads us to bring all the gifts we think fitting; but among them, our hearts—the only gift that God really asks from us.

This story is so factually fragile, yet ripe with truth. And the robust truth of this story is this: As many human hearts as there are yearning in the darkness, there are an equal number of ways home to the kingdom where God alone reigns. The star is shining. And if we will let it guide us, God will turn paths from all directions into holy pilgrimages to the Absolute until our hearts are afire with the light of God shining with hope, peace, joy and love for a dark world to see.