

BRINGING SHINY GIFTS TO DARK PLACES
A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
DECEMBER 23, 2007—FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
FOURTH IN A SERIES—NATIVITY NARRATIVES
THE LESSON FOR THE DAY—MATTHEW 2:1-12
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The first thing I want to tell you this morning is that I am not accustomed to falling on my knees in worship. Reverence is not the mood of my spirit. I am a thinking man, and for a thinking man, unusual earthly phenomena are to be dissected and analyzed, not worshiped. We don't go around falling down on our faces like women, for God's sake.

Often we have been called "wise men," an unusually perceptive nomenclature, if you will permit me to say so, because, after all, my I.Q. was, and is, 157. Not to blare my own trumpet or anything, but my curriculum vitae will inform you that I discovered and named fourteen different stars (a thousand years before the telescope), coined dozens of obfuscatory sesquipedalianisms, unraveled inscrutable equations, and mastered cryptic calculi. Wise man? Apt, I dare to boast.

Some through the ages have thought us to be kings—for instance that song you sing, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. Others have said that we were priests from Persia. But actually I was neither a king nor a priest. I am, or was, a scholar, an academician, a teacher. My name is Melchior X. Zoroaster, Ph.D., and I hold the Distinguished Starbuck Chair of the Department of Astronomy at the University of Babylon. As you might guess, my chair was named for the Ethiopian gazillionaire who endowed it after discovering how to brew an oddly bracing beverage from the otherwise unremarkable bean of a small tree that grew in my part of the world. Arabian coffee: still the world's standard. Starbuck: poetic, no?

Actually, the astronomy department was also the astrology department at the University of Babylon. In your own day there are two disciplines—astronomy, the *science* of the movements of the stars; and astrology, the art of the interpre-

tation of the stars' movements and their impact on daily life; your daily horoscopes, for example.

So you see we Magi were scientists, but we were also dream-interpreters, magicians, seers who tried to predict the future.

Did you know that your English word "magic" comes from the word "Magi?" Yes, you see we were both scientists and magicians. Your own twenty-first century would find it strange for an academic institution to be dabbling in both of those very different things. You don't see Stephen Hawking writing horoscopes in *The New York Post*, for pity's sake. But in my day, there was much less difference between science and magic. In my day, science WAS magic, and magic was science. In a moment I want to suggest that a little magic is required of your scientists today as well. But more on that later.

Me. I liked to observe things. I was most comfortable when I could fasten something down, observe an astral event, speculate about its origin and cause, and calculate what might happen next. I was happiest out on a mountaintop just studying the heavens. We did not have telescopes the size of this room like you.

I would have given ten years' salary for just one look through the eyepiece of the telescope at Palomar, or for one hour to fiddle with the joystick on the Hubble. We did not have your telescopes, but we did have our minds.

Together one night in what by your reckoning would be 6 B.C.—we discovered an extraordinarily brilliant star in the western sky. Later we learned that what we saw was the conjunction in the

constellation Leo of the planets Jupiter and Saturn, so close together that they appeared to be a single point of light. It is a celestial phenomenon which happens about once every 20 years.

My colleagues said that the event in the skies foretold something portentous. **I** wanted to stay home and observe it, chart its movements, write an article in the scientific journal. **They** went running off to the library, dug out some dusty old Hebrew books, and my young unseasoned colleagues decide that the star meant that a king was to be born in Palestine.

For us, you see, the planet Jupiter symbolized kingship, and the planet Saturn stood for the lands of Syria and Palestine, and these two portents appearing together in the constellation Leo, or the Lion of Judah, convinced my young colleagues that a Jewish king was to be born in the land of Palestine. And with typical youthful enthusiasm, like a couple of school boys, they decided that they had no choice but to follow the star.

I don't know how they talked me into going with them. I guess I went for the adventure of it all. I guess I went because a scientist like me is always restless with an omnivorous curiosity. I guess I went because I knew that these two youngsters, who spent more time in the *library* than they did actually observing the stars, would have set off in the wrong direction and gotten hopelessly lost without my seasoned assistance. I guess I went because I was 60 years old and bored doing the same old thing for 35 years—lectures to write, papers to grade, freshman grammar to decipher, publish or perish.

So off we went. We got a federal grant, rented some camels, and off we went. We must have made a pretty motley crew, the three of us: an assistant wise man, an associate wise man, and me, the Chairman of the Wisdom Department,¹

¹This phrase is stolen shamelessly from Garrison Keillor in one of his *News from Lake Wobegon* recordings.

meandering across the countryside in lands unknown, following a pinprick of light on the western horizon.

Man! We followed that bloody star for months. We journeyed through some of the dustiest, grimmest, most god-forsaken country I have ever seen in my life. After a couple of weeks I would have killed for a decent cabernet sauvignon.

We finally reached Jerusalem, the capital. I'm not sure what made us think that the man in charge would have any answers for us, but it seemed like a good idea at the time, so we went to the governor's palace, where we met King Herod, a fat stupid little man who surrounded himself with dancing girls, floozies, toadies and bodyguards the size of Arnold Scharzenegger.

It's a lethal equation--power-lust plus paranoia equals megalomania. Herod's was a dangerous chemistry. You've never met anyone like him, and thank your lucky stars for that (no pun intended).

But ironically, it was the paranoid atheist Herod who first tipped me off that there might be more to this baby than I had hoped for. Herod was obviously deathly afraid of this child, I guess because Herod was the type of man who feels surrounded and threatened at all times, and he must have thought this baby would grow up and snatch the crown right off his bald head. If a man as powerful as Herod feared this child, there must be something extraordinary about him.

But despite his deep fears, Herod could tell us nothing about the whereabouts of this child. We did finally get it out of some priests, who seemed to fear this child as much as Herod did, that the Hebrew prophecies predicted that the child was to be born in the little hick town of Bethlehem, about five miles to the south.

Herod tells us to go find the child and return to tell him, Herod, so that he could worship the new king too, which was about as transparent as the eyepiece of a telescope. He sent a couple of his

henchmen to follow us, but Herod surrounded himself with people even stupider than he was, so it was pretty easy to shake them.

Anyway, off we go to Bethlehem. We get there and search town for the baby king. No one seems to know anything about it. When we ask villagers about it we're greeted with blank stares. I ask one passerby if he's heard anything about a young man and a new mother and a baby lying in a manger, and he looks at me as if I'd just escaped from the funny farm and says, "What are you, some kind of wise guy?" And I said, "I beg your pardon, sir, I am no wise *guy*. I am a wise *man*." So we had to find the baby on our own.

And eventually we find the child—in a modest carpenter's home in Bethlehem. Matthew wrote it this way: "When they saw it, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Good old Matthew, piling adjective atop adverb to give his readers some small glimpse of the deep, unspeakable joy the three of us felt when we saw that baby king.

You ask, "Why so joyful? Why all this unrestrained mirth?" Good question. How can I explain it to you? The joy came from elsewhere. Joy's not native to my soul. I suppose I was always a reasonably happy man, but joviality did not come from inside me. It was a gift, coming from someplace else.

All I know is that I found at the manger something unexpected, something that even in my wildest dreams a wise man could never have anticipated. The child was something entirely new to our world, something the world had never seen, and will never see again, until the end of time. The only proper response was to kneel, praise, and admit that I had no business seeing this with my old, jaded, world-weary eyes. Nursing babies—they never upset me. It's just a biological fact, a scientific necessity. But I turned my face.

I don't know what made us think a baby would have any use for our very regal gifts. On the way to Bethlehem I thought more than once to myself

that we ought to be taking diapers and rattles and pajamas with feet attached. But somehow gold and frankincense and myrrh—they were perfect gifts for this baby—gold for a king, frankincense for the One who was also God, and myrrh for him who was to die.

You know, the way Luke tells the story, Christmas came to a few women, a carpenter, and some silly, ignorant shepherds. As far as I can tell, we three wise men are the only *smart* people who ever worshiped Christ openly during his lifetime.

I am glad that Matthew told our story. Because it reminds all of us that Christmas is not just for children who believe in Santa Claus and anything else you tell them. Christmas is not just for the gullible and the naive and the superstitious. Christmas is for smart people. Christmas is for wise men and wise women.

Luke tells us that the shepherds came from right around the corner to worship the Christ Child. It's just five miles to Bethlehem from those shepherd fields, a ninety-minute walk. Matthew tells us that we wise men had to travel across five hundred miles of trackless desert wastes to get to the same place.

Perhaps what Matthew is trying to tell us is that the wise and educated have further to travel to find their joy. A lot of criticism and skepticism and analysis and smirking and sneering to wade through first.

The thing is, when you get to the manger, there is less difference than people think between a shepherd and a wise man, between a child and an astro-physicist.

Matthew called me a wise man. All my life long I thought of myself that way—educated, worldly-wise, detached, informed, savvy, urbane. But I discovered at Bethlehem that though I had always been smart and knowledgeable, it was only **after** Bethlehem that I became wise.

Because wisdom is more than education. It is more than experience, more than books and telescopes and laboratories. Wisdom is the ability to see beneath the face of things a deeper meaning hidden there. It is the ability to see that common earthly things can hide mysterious wonders. It is to see that straw can shine like gold. It is to see that even dumb oxen and asses and sheep can become a worshipful congregation. It is to see that a tiny baby, with nothing to his name but the rags on his body and the milk in his mother's breast, will grow up to save the world from itself.

Not long ago, this headline appeared in your most respectable newspaper: "Almost in Awe, Physicists Ponder Ultimate Theory."² What the article meant to say is that the universe is turning out to be stranger than our wildest dreams. The fantasies of science fiction are not as curious or as outlandish as what turns out to be the real, factual world. The only proper response is shock and awe. "Almost in Awe, Physicists Ponder Ultimate Theory." I thought maybe that story was about us, three wise men in Bethlehem, 6 B.C.

But no, it was written about your own scientists—1998. It turns out that your own scientists, this late in history's day, need to be magicians to figure out this very strange world. Behind and beneath the observable universe, it appears, is mystery, magic, miracle, things and events we never anticipated and still don't understand.

The more deeply you probe the inscrutable mysteries of natural phenomena, the more you begin to understand that the whole astonishing show of nature is inlaid with mystery and suffused with wonder. The stars are fire on the altars of the gods. Man is spirit, and woman too. The mountains and the hills and the rocks and even the tectonic plates which anchor the nations are not matter, but energy. The great blue whale sings her haunting songs in the briny deep, and the panther

²George Johnson, "Almost in Awe, Physicists Ponder 'Ultimate' Theory," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1998.

thinks his panther thoughts. Even the infinite empty intergalactic spaces in the farthest reaches of the cosmos are ensouled with spirit, and it is all *ALIVE*.

I went looking for an adventure, and found a mystery.

I went looking for a baby king, and found God.

I went looking for knowledge, and found wisdom.

I followed a star, and found joy.

Where will you have to go, my friend, to find your joy? Take your treasure, my friend, and follow the star into the darkness to some tawdry, meager place.

Take your gold, my friend, and lay it beside the child in the manger. Because the Holy One was once homeless too.

Take your frankincense, my friend, and lift its sweet smell with your prayers to that Mysterious Grace which fires the stars and sends them flaming through the night.

Take your myrrh, my friend, and make some stinking ghetto hole sweet-smelling once again.

I followed the star, and at the manger found a wisdom that leads to joy. And I went home by another way. Because, you see, you just can never be the same again, once you've been to the manger.³

³My interpretation of certain details in the story from Matthew 2:1-23—for instance, the identity of the Magi, the guess that the Eastern Star was actually a planetary conjunction, and the integral importance of the figure of King Herod to the story—are heavily dependent on Raymond E. Brown's reading in *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 165-232.