

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Grace and peace to you from the God of earth and stars, of kings and wise men... the God born as a child, but worthy of worship. Amen.

So who are these “wise men”? Who are these “Magi” (as we sometimes call them from their name in Greek)? You know, I feel an odd sort of kinship with the Magi. Growing up in Minot, North Dakota our high school mascot was a “Magician,” and so we were often called “The Magi,” for short.

So if I’m not careful, I can easily slip off into a daydream where the Magi are wearing maroon and gold (school colors for us Magi) and as they enter the house and see the child with Mary, right before they offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they break into the school song of the Minot Magi:

Loyal and true, we pledge our hope and faith in you
Right is the rule, we are all for one and all for Minot High School
Here’s to the fame, and may we always meet the foe
With glory and honor forever, so why not, Minot? Let’s go fight win!

But, once I get that out of my system, I return to my question and ask again, who are these Magi that have made their way into our nativity sets?

At least we’re in good company. For thousands of years, the imaginations of Christians have been captured by Matthew’s story of these Magi. Were they professional astrologers from Babylonia? Were they actually magicians, evil ones or just “amateur” magicians? Were they (as some historians suggest) members of the Zoroastrian priestly caste? Never mind, I can barely pronounce it, let alone say what it means.

I want to suggest this morning, this tenth day of Christmas, that we agree to let these questions lay for the time being. I want to suggest that even though the world has long-since torn down their Christmas decorations, that we turn our attention to that nativity scene, and as we peer into the faces of these figures that offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh we imagine our own faces.

It's not just the Magi, after all, who journey from the East and ask questions, search and yearn for something that they haven't yet found and can't quite explain.

We come this morning, don't we, with our questions, our uncertainties, our anxieties, our searching and yearning... And just as the sun rises in the east, we rise this week with a new year. *Two-thousand-ten* or *twenty-ten*, have you decided what you're going to call it? Either way, and whether you've made resolutions this New Year's or you plan to or you've made them and already broken them, you have to admit there is something about starting a new year.

Whether you're facing end-of-life decisions, whether you're in the middle-ages of your life, whether you are just getting started on this journey we call life, there's something about a new year, isn't there? It seems to me there is a certain promise, a certain hope, a certain opportunity to dream and change and begin a new journey.

The Magi are led first by a star. And let's assume for a moment that they *are* professional astrologers which seems likely enough. If we envision ourselves as the Magi, we might draw the conclusion, that if we want to draw closer to the Christ Child this new year that like the Magi we just might be led by the vocation we find ourselves in.

If you're a teacher, perhaps it will be a student or two that leads you closer to Christ in 2010. If you're a student, it might just be a teacher or two that guides you to Christ in 2010. If you're a lawyer, it might be the legal system that directs you closer to Christ; if you're a doctor or nurse, perhaps it'll be the health care system; if you work in construction, maybe it'll be a house or the materials that you work with; if you're retired...then you're probably out of luck... and if you're a retired pastor, you're really out of luck.

But, you get the idea. We often think that being Christian means being something other than what we already are. That we have to act different or feel different or think different or be different. Maybe one of the lessons of the Magi – one of the gifts of the Magi – is that you can be what you are: a NASA astronomer, a school lunchroom supervisor, a Forest Service manager or a Park's Service interpreter and you can be led, you will be led to the Christ child. It just might be an unexpected route you take.

If this is one of the gifts of the Magi, the second gift or lesson has less to do with them and more to do with the people they encounter on their journey. On the way, before they meet the Christ child, they first meet King Herod.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that King Herod and all Jerusalem, for that matter, were frightened by the Magi's questions. And let me tell you, they had plenty to fear on more than one level.

You see, if a King of the Judeans really was going to be born, then King Herod's position was threatened. And if Rome got wind that a new King was rising up in this backwater of a country, it wouldn't take much for them to send a few thousand troops to "put to rest" any attempt at regime change.

But it's more than that... King Herod doesn't know it yet, the Magi don't know it yet, we probably don't fully grasp it yet, but this, of course, isn't the kind of king that the Christ child will grow up to be.

He didn't come for regime change. He didn't come to replace one person wearing a crown with somebody else. He came to change the entire way regimes are set-up. He came to replace the worship of unstoppable power with worship through and in vulnerable love, revealed in the cross. Maybe this is a second gift, a second lesson of the story of the Magi.

In 2010, no doubt, you'll be given plenty of opportunities to follow the advice, the wisdom, the direction of King Herod. And let me warn you, the power of empire is difficult to ignore. It seems innocent enough. Sometimes it gains your trust by claiming that it too wants to worship the Christ child. It has a certain seduction with its call to consume. It's intoxicating with its focus on the self, not the neighbor, not those in need.

But make no mistake, its power is death.

So thanks be to God, this second lesson of the Magi, when we imagine ourselves as them in this story, is to know that there is another power. A real power. A power of life.

Because if the power of empire is like Chinese food (you know how they say, Chinese food fills you up, but before long you desperately hunger for more); then the power revealed in and through this Christ child is the power of a meal where all are welcome to eat their fill and to really be filled and made whole.

So when you meet the Christ Child, as no doubt you will in 2010, you'll know it. And you'll have nothing to do but fall on your knees and worship. You'll have nothing to do but open the suitcase of your heart – the one you've been carrying for miles – and you'll dump it out, offer everything you've got. No doubt, you'll leave it there at the feet of this God revealed and made flesh. You'll leave the anxieties you've accumulated, the misguided trusts you've collected, and you'll learn to trust once again in the power of vulnerable love.

Of course, Matthew's story tells us that the Magi offer three gifts. And if the first gift is a lesson that you don't have to be anybody or anything other than yourself; and if the second gift is vulnerable love as an alternative to the unstoppable power of empire; then maybe the third gift is simply to know that in the end, all the good gifts, all the real gifts, all the gifts of life come from God.

After all, the Magi, in the end, are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. And they leave "for their own country by another road," Matthew's Gospel tells us. When you encounter God, it's like going home, but "by another road" – by another way.

The way of God lays before us this New Year, *two-thousand-ten* or *twenty-ten*, call it what you will. Thanks be to God for the earth and the stars, for kings and wise men, for the God born as a child, but worthy of worship. Amen.