

“In Steps with the Magi”
Matthew 2: 1-12
Epiphany Sunday-January 6, 2012
CCUMC
Melanie Dobson Hughes

Who are these Magi? Common Ideas

What do you think of when you hear “the wise men” or the Magi? (show nativity figures) Maybe you think of figures like this from the nativity set. There are three, they are dressed in kingly apparel, and they are different colors. Later Christian traditions supplied their names as Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar, and as being descendants of the three sons of Noah. Their different colors represent the known continents at the time of Jesus’ birth—Africa, Asia, and Europe. However, none of this historiography represents what is really in the biblical text. . .

The Real Magi

The text from Matthew doesn’t specify three men, but rather three gifts. Eastern Orthodox traditions actually give the number of magi as twelve; for all we know there could have been much more---and they could have brought their wives and children with them. In terms of their actual home, they were most likely from regions east of Judea, such as Armenia or Babylon. Their skin color was most likely Middle Eastern or Arabian.

They weren’t actually kings, either. Based on the word used in Matthew, they were magi. Magi is the Greek word for a professional class of astrologers. They used horoscopes and the signs of the zodiac. For them to follow a star would be right in keeping with their practices of studying the heavens. They were practitioners of eastern magical arts. Magi ran Persian schools that taught their ancient traditions, and they advised the kingly courts with proverbs and instruction. In the book of Deuteronomy in the OT, for example, magi provide instruction to the tribes of Israel. King Solomon was seen as an example of a wise

man, while the book of 2nd Samuel 14 points to the existence of guilds of wise women as well. Judaism's early temples were filled with stars and signs of the zodiac. In the minds of the people, magi would be just the right sort of folk to follow a star to mark the birth of a significant person—in fact every important birth (of a prince or government figure) would be accompanied by a star. Magi setting forth to follow star made perfect cultural sense to Matthew's audience.

Actions of the Magi

Matthew, however, isn't as concerned with describing who the Magi are—he assumes his audience will already know this. The author of Matthew is much more concerned with what the Magi do; the passage abounds with verbs. The wise men **travel** from the East, they **ask** Herod questions, they **go** to Bethlehem at King Herod's urging, they **rejoice** when they encounter Jesus, they **offer** him homage, they **give** gifts, and then they **journey** away. These are active Magi! We'll take these verbs in turn, for what they can teach us.

First, they **travel** from the East. The Magi leave their homes and their security. They take a leap of faith to leave all they have ever known to find the Christ child. On this faith-filled journey to Jerusalem, though, they travel together. They are a community in search of the one born with a star above him.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, their next action is to **ask** for directions. They need a little help finding a king—surely he would be born in the capital? The King Herod doesn't know, but the chief priests of Israel do. They tell the Magi the verse from the prophet Micah, which says that from Bethlehem will come forth the ruler to shepherd the people Israel. The Magi, not being Jewish, would have never thought of the little town of

Bethlehem. Note here that one verb they don't do is to pay homage to King Herod; they know he isn't the king for whom a star rises.

With Herod's hypocritical blessing, they then **set forth** for Bethlehem. When they finally find the baby, they do a whole series of verbs. They **rejoice** at the messianic fulfillment. They kneel and pay him homage; these Eastern magicians realize that here is the one with the true wonder of redemption. They don't try any flashy magic tricks. The magi realize that here is something they could never achieve; God incarnate. One whom the universe cannot contain enclosed in a tiny baby's body. Here, wrapped in swaddling with dirt and dung all around him, is one worthy of true worship.

So the next verb for the Magi is to **offer** Jesus him gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were valuable items that most magi would have kept in stock with them. They offer the best that they have. They didn't do shopping in advance for Jesus (these are guys, after all). They were just following a star. They didn't realize that the baby they would find would change them. They hadn't planned that they would feel compelled to go back out to their camels, ruffle through their bags, and pull out the best of what they had.

Then, given a divine warning, they **journey** back to their home country by a different road. We don't hear any more from them. We don't know how these magicians from the East fared after a visit to Jesus. We can know, though, from all of their actions in the story, that they were changed. They were different because of their journey to meet Christ. They beckon to us to come join us in the journey, to follow in their steps to faith.

In the Steps of the Magi

On this Epiphany Sunday, we are called to follow in the light of a star—a star that beams out the shape of the cross. We, like the Magi, are called to take a leap of faith, and journey from what we know in order to find Christ in our lives. We have to trust in divine

guidance, even when the way seems dark and the path unclear. Like the wise men, we don't know our destination---and we'll at times end up in places like Bethlehem, where we never would have expected to find ourselves in life. The good news is that we don't travel alone. Together as the church we help one another to find our way. We pray together, eat bread and wine together, sing and worship and live together—finding our way to Christ incarnate together.

I know in my own life I've always been surprised by where the star has led me. When I was a senior in college, like most seniors, I spent a great deal of time trying to discern what I was called to do in life (now I realize this is an always on-going process!). I took the LSAT for law school, I had my applications all ready to go. Then I went on a foreign study to Eastern Europe and Russia to study transitions to democracy for my political science degree. By some strange gift of planning, our professors arranged for us to spend a couple of days in Suzdal, a Russian Orthodox monastery several hundred miles from Moscow. It was January, and cold, with snow falling all about. I walked by myself to stand outside of the chapel. While standing at the elaborately carved door, the nuns' voices drifted to me, sounding like the ethereal songs of angels. My heart was swept up in the beauty of their worship. Then, as clear as the bells ringing out through the wintry air, I felt God saying to me, "Go and serve. Go and serve."

When I got home from that foreign study, I cancelled my law school applications. Instead, I applied to be a United Methodist Volunteer in Mission in Latin America. I was appointed to Honduras, to teach in a middle school. As I taught my students in that tropical land, as I taught Sunday School, and started a service group for youth, I realized a call into ministry. From Honduras, I applied to theological graduate schools. I went to Duke Divinity, and began my career in ministry. I look back, and see God guiding me in the light

of a star. Now, in major decisions in life, I continue to try to walk in the light of a star—ending up sometimes in places like Carbondale, CO, where I would have never expected to be.

The Magi teach us that in our journey of faith, Christ moves us, changes us to offer our best gifts. Gifts of teaching, speaking, healing, encouraging, sharing, loving, leading. We don't perhaps travel on camels with saddlebags, but we are nonetheless to rummage through our lives, and offer the best of what we have to Jesus.

Then, changed and transformed by the encounter with Christ, we leave by a different road. The love of God gives us courage to make a change in life, to go in a different direction, to nurture a different way of being. In this new year, rather than resolutions, consider how God might be calling you to go on the journey in the light of a star. How might you travel by a different road this year? What would it look like to be open to being transformed by the love of God into someone different than you are now? What would it mean to you to follow in the steps of the Magi? "O star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light."

God of the blazing star, who led strangers in the night to bow down before a baby—teach us to walk in the trusting steps of the Magi so that we too may journey onwards in faithfulness, guided by your light. We pray these things through Jesus, a crying infant who grew up to save us. Amen.