

Text: Matthew 2: 1-12
Title: Six Miles
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Despite singing, “We Three Kings of Orient are...” there are only two kings in our story: Jesus and Herod. In fact, we’re better off thinking of this story as the collision of two kings rather than the travels of three kings.

Let’s sit with the text for a few minutes....

Our translation reads that “magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” And, the word here for magi means something akin to magician or astrologer. It was most often connected to priests of Zoroastrianism, a religious sect that practiced astrology.

They weren’t your garden variety “spiritual but not religious” types; they were strange sorcerers and stargazers. More than just horoscope readers who frequented the “Psychic Hotline,” in the eyes of the Hebrews they were pagan priests. In Acts 13, Paul describes Elymas, a Jewish Magi, as “...a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?”

That’s a far cry from kindly kings bringing tasteful gifts.

Great legend and lore has been built up around the magi. Bede the Venerable, a Benedictine monk in the Middle Ages, named and described three magi. (Maybe because there were three gifts?) “Melchior...an old man with white hair and a long beard,” “Gaspar...young and beardless and ruddy complexioned,” and “Balthasar...black skinned and heavily bearded.”

I recently saw a creche in my neighborhood that picked up on these very details for the three wise men gathered around the manger. The most striking was the tall regal black Balthasar. And baby Jesus was as white as some Dutch kid born in Zeeland, Michigan.

But, the tradition of three magi got traction. As the story goes Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar were baptized by the Apostle Thomas on his way to preach the gospel in India. Their relics (bones and bandages) were transferred from Persia to Constantinople by Emperor Constantine’s mother, and from there to Milan, and by 1145 to the Cathedral in Cologne, Germany where they reside now....

But, what is actually in the text?
Let’s come at it this way....

About 600 years before Jesus was born, after being exiled in Iraq, Jews returned to Jerusalem. They came back to a “bombed-out” Jerusalem. They were dispirited and defeated. Who wants to live in the rubble of a fallen city, with a failing economy, and little hope on the horizon?

However, in the midst of that despair, the prophet Isaiah painted a vision of an expectant hope when everything would change. From Isaiah 60:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you... Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... You will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth of the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come.... Foreigners will rebuild your walls, and their kings will serve you....

(An early version of, “Mexico will pay for the wall.”)

The prophet anticipates renewal and rebirth for the Hebrews. Trade will thrive, culture will flourish, caravans of foreign goods will pour into Jerusalem, and there will be peace and prosperity for the promises of God are sure.

So, when the magi read the stars, maybe with that prophecy in mind, they head for Jerusalem. They head to what amounted to the Jewish capital during Roman occupation in search of the “King of the Jews.” They go to pay homage to the new king and that gets the old king’s tunic in a bundle....

Herod calls for a consultation with the top-drawer theological authorities to asks them about these foreigners and their news. “Tell me about this vision of Isaiah’s, tell me about this star, and tell me about this Messiah and where he will be born.”

The scholars respond that he’s reading the wrong text.

“Look, we know that it seems like Jerusalem is the center of power and that if there was going to be a new king this would be the right place to look, but they’re off by six miles. They’re reading the wrong the prophet. The scriptures say that a king will come from Bethlehem in Judea. See look, right here in Micah.”

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Six miles.

Bethlehem is six miles south of Jerusalem. The magi saw the stars, remembered the wrong prophet, looked at the wrong map, and missed it by six miles. And in doing so they alerted Herod who in turn slaughtered all the infants in the region. They read the wrong text and the story takes a dark turn. They missed it by six miles and the collision of two kings and two kingdoms is set in motion.

Does that read too much into our text?

In think in some ways it points toward the paradox or mystery of God in Christ. We expect God to play by our rules and affirm our instincts. Surely the promised king would know his way around the halls of power, embody dominion, and exercise strength. Surely, he would be

politically savvy, with the right pedigree, from the right schools, the builder of an empire, a man of substantial means. That's how kings and kingdoms work...

But, the new king was born in a dusty backwater village.

He was poor and powerless and vulnerable.

He would soon be a refugee on the run.

He would live on the margins, without an army or a well-financed family.

And, he would be executed by the state between too common criminals.

Hardly the stuff of kings....

It's worth noting that the professional preachers and teachers stay put. They deliver their report to Herod and flush with confidence go back to their studies. They don't drop their books, follow the star, or take up the quest to find their king. The seers and sorcerers seek the new king in Bethlehem. They continue their journey. Sure, Herod told them to go, but it's easy to imagine that having come this far they didn't need Herod's nudging to go six more miles. The theologians stay put but the magi go to Bethlehem.

William Willimon describes it this way:

Matthew begins his gospel, this most Jewish of gospels, the gospel where everything is backed up by reference to the Jewish scriptures, by saying that it was these outsiders, these pagans, these magicians who were the first to come to the baby Jesus, to see him for who he was, to lay down their gifts and worship him. In other words, Matthew says that this baby is God's gift for the whole world, for the people out beyond the boundaries, even the people who get confused about the boundaries between respectable religion and primitive magic.

And dear friends, that means that there's room in the story of Israel for those beyond the boundaries. The epiphany of the two kings is that one of them establishes a kingdom with room for all ~ even for Dutch kids born in Zeeland, even for you and me. Thanks be to God.

Well what are the implications of this ancient story for us?

Let me offer one suggestion....

Hope's Elders have been reading together over the last few years. We've read about spiritual disciplines and the practices of the church. We read a chapter a month and then spend a few minutes in conversation and reflection. It seems helpful, fruitful, elderly....

This year we're reading *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* by Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, the former General Secretary of the Reformed Church in America.

Michaelson writes that the church is at a hinge point in history ~ not unlike the East-West schism of 1054 or the Protestant Reformation of 1517. The swing today is that for the first time in more than 1000 years a majority of the world's Christians live in the global south. The church is declining in the north and west (think Europe and the United States) and growing in the south

and east (think Asia, Africa, South America). The church is less white and more colorful. Thanks be to God.

In the United States there's all sorts of evidence of the changing shape of church life. For example, a study in 2015 revealed that over half of US congregations have under 100 members. There's nothing wrong with small churches, but when you consider the average age of membership the future seems bleak. A similar study predicts that 30 to 40 percent of US congregations will close in the next 30 years.

And don't look to the CRC or RCA for encouragement. Both denominations report similar declines in members and worship participation. Last summer's CRC synod included a membership graph that depicted a long slow slide with no hint of anything that might change the trajectory. (And, that picture would be worse were it not for the addition of Korean congregations on the west coast...)

I could go on.
You get the idea....

Dear friends, one substantial challenge for Hope's future is how we live into this changing reality. How do we side with the King who was born on the margins and welcomed by the magi? How do we side with the changing global church? What can we learn and what do we have to offer?

Michaelson puts it this way:

The question is whether US churches will be locked into a parochial story of their gradual demise or liberated by the global story that is bringing new life into its midst from unexpected places.

It seems to me that we need to continue opening up ways in which we welcome, serve, partner, and learn others. For example, supporting and praying with the Pachecos as they seek to plant a new church in East Garfield Park, learning from and listening to Yudha Thianto and exploring ways that we can connect with the church in Indonesia, continuing to invest in our partnership with Roseland Christian Ministries, finding ways to welcome and support immigrants, encouraging the vision and work of the Geisterfers in Central America, engaging in conversation and fellowship with Muslim neighbors, etc, etc....

We'll probably make mistakes, not every attempt will be successful (however success is defined), and we might end up missing the mark by six miles. But, rather than follow the theologians let us follow the lead of the magi who were not deterred until they found the King. Let us not be deterred until we make room for all at the table of the King.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.
Amen.