

Jeremiah 31: 7-14  
Ephesians 1: 3-6, 15-19a  
Matthew 2: 1-12  
3rd Christmas/Epiphany

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### **“Where is this Child?”**

As modern people, many of us believe that travel is a good thing, even if we continue to live close to our mothers – as a recent study suggests than most Americans over the age of 25 live within 20 miles of their mothers. But the notion of travel as educational, recreational, valuable in its own right is very much a modern concept. For most of history, only the desperate traveled. In fact, the evidence of wealth and power was the ability to stay in one place and have others bring things to you. Travel was dangerous, uncomfortable, filled with uncertainty and delays, expensive, likely to make one ill, and generally to be avoided if at all possible. Oh wait, that’s still true today. While it is true that about 46% of all Americans own a passport, relatively few Americans actually travel abroad during their lifetimes. In ancient times, travel truly was looked upon as madness by most people. War, famine, and other natural disasters could trigger the movement of people but most intelligent people stayed put in one place, among their own kind, for generations and counted themselves blessed to be able to do so.

So what possessed these so-called wise ones to travel so far on such a slim hope? What were they thinking? We infer from Matthew’s telling that they had seen a new star in the West, a star never before seen. Apparently these wise ones were astronomers of some sort – checking the night skies for portents and signs. Somehow, they interpret this celestial event to suggest the birth of a powerful person, a belief not uncommon among ancient cultures – that the natural world was influenced by births and deaths of some individuals. And so these wise ones left home and hearth and traveled untold distances to see what this celestial event pointed toward. Their arrival in Jerusalem triggered much consternation among the powerful for the wise ones had interpreted the star to mean the birth of a King and it appeared to be the King of Judea. How the star indicated that fact is not completely clear but it appeared that the star stopped over the territory known as Judea. Somebody remembered the ancient prophecies about a Messiah who was to be born in Bethlehem and so Herod, a powerful person who remember does not travel, sends these visitors to see if it were so in that town. And, as we know, they found the child with Mary his mother. Because they thought they were to meet someone enormously powerful – someone whose birth could move the heavens, they brought special gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh and this tells us that they were men since no women would bring gifts like that to a woman with a new born child.

Scholars believe that this story is about the clear fulfillment of every prophecy making Christ Jesus the Messiah. Scholars also have argued that since the wise ones came from “the East,” this epiphany or showing reveals the coming of Christ for all God’s creation not just the people of Israel. The acceptance of the Christ by outsiders prefigures the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles. We hear this in Paul’s use of the word adoption and his imagery of being chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. Moreover, those unhelpful gifts the wise men bring are clearly royal gifts suitable for a ruler. Now, later believers will imply that myrrh was to foretell the death of Jesus on the cross, the frankincense to foretell his abilities in prayer, and the gold symbolized his

purity and virtue. One legend has it that these gifts were stolen by the two thieves crucified with Jesus or, alternatively, swindled away from the disciples by Judas. Other embellishments include having them become kings in their own right instead of Magi – a term from which we get our word magic. They get names, and some people believe that one came from Persia, one from Africa, and one from Ireland.

These are nice stories and it is fun to speculate about this sort of Biblical trivia but is there a larger meaning, especially for us today?

We should always remember that the coming of the Christ child was an act that would upset the traditional ordering of the world. The coming of the Messiah was revolutionary; it was scary; it was going to create all sorts of challenges and difficulties. The endurance of Christianity is also upsetting. Christ is against business as usual. The message of Christianity, when stripped of its legendary elements is a message of radical hope and love, challenging the world to be different. Herod's fears that this birth would take away his power and wealth and influence are mirrored by the human fears that living into the message of Christ Jesus will take away the power and wealth and influence of some of us and give those nice things to the "others." Salvation is not just about personal piety – about being really nice for long periods of time so we each can get into heaven. The Way of Jesus is about re-ordering this world and that is always complex and unsettling.

Our story from Matthew does not tell us much about the reaction of these so-called wise men. They kneel in homage, present their gifts, and go back home by a different route, avoiding Herod's plot to maintain his earthly throne. One wonders, having made this long unpleasant journey, filled with dangers and problems, what those wise ones thought when they were led to a tiny stable behind a poor inn in a small village outside Jerusalem. Did they truly believe what their eyes revealed? They had followed a star – a celestial sign of great power and influence only to be led to the margins of respectable society to visit with a family of nobodies? Though they were close to Jerusalem, they were so very far from the centers of power and influence. Moreover, they were led to a child – a babe in arms – charming, no doubt, as new-borne babies are, but still – all that way for this? They came seeking great power and were led to a baby, held by a young woman, surrounded by poverty. Surely, one of the three checked their calculations again if only to be certain that they had not messed up in some way.

We, like the wise ones, often travel long distances only to discover that the amazing things we sought are not what we expected. We, too, often go out of our ways, looking for answers that were close to home all along. It is as if we cannot see what is in front of our eyes unless we go to some other place that shocks us into seeing what we could have seen at home. How puzzled God must be about our refusal to see what is right in front of us just because it is familiar and home-grown but when we see the very same thing elsewhere in the world, we ooh and aah over something or some idea we ignored when we it saw it in our home-town. How often do we seek the truth in exotic places, from odd sources, when it has been in front of us, or within us, all along? It is true that humans are more interested in the new than the old. Sometimes, old ideas in new settings make them come alive for us – we see them with fresh eyes. And, seeing the new and the different helps us in understanding ourselves. For in travel, we learn most about ourselves and we, too, go home by a different route for these experiences have changed us.

The message of Christianity – the Good News of God in Christ is not actually hidden; it is not exotic; it does not require extensive travel. The Gospel lives in our midst, hidden in plain sight. It is in small things – it is in the ordinary manner of life. The world comes seeking power and God responds with truth. The world comes, asking, “Where is this child,” but wanting power and influence, and God answers, ‘My love for you and for all creation is already here – in your hearts, your minds, your souls, waiting for you to kneel and accept it. Pay homage to the love that is within you and has been all this time. When you pay homage to yourselves and to one another, you pay homage to God. I am not only in the stars, I am not often noticed by the rich and powerful for they are too absorbed in controlling things and people; but I am in you and you are in Me; you, the traveler and the stranger are at home even before you leave.’ God says, “I’ll leave the light on for you.” Amen.