

Wisdom Seekers

Matthew 2:1-12 by Patty Friesen (Dec.8/19)

Perhaps of all the characters of the Christmas story the Magi, or the wisdom seekers are my favourite. They appear only in Matthew's gospel. Matthew is the Jewish gospel, written to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. The promises of Isaiah: of the Jewish exiles returning home from Babylon and the Babylonian kings bringing gold, and frankincense back to Jerusalem after having plundered it decades before, would have made Jewish hearts throb. It is a wonderful reversal of fortunes, wealth coming to the poor, worship coming to the lowly, King Herod usurped by a baby king.

But Matthew is careful lest the story become a cause for nationalistic pride. First and foremost, the wisdom seekers are not Jewish. They are Gentiles, foreigners, unclean pork eating astronomers who tell the future by looking at the stars, which is expressly forbidden in Jewish law. Despite their paganism, they leave their comfortable homeland, following the special star and God honoured their trust by safely leading them to Bethlehem and home again. As pagans and outsiders, they represent the many excluded groups included in the salvation which Jesus brings.

Matthew's readers would have remembered a similar story when in 66 AD, a delegation arrived in Rome consisting of Tiridates, King of Armenia and the sons of three neighboring Parthian rulers. This royal party from the East, also described as magi, by Roman historian Pliny, had come to Rome to honour Emperor Nero and Rome was decorated with lights and garlands to receive them. Upon meeting Nero, Tiridates proclaimed, I have come to pay you homage my lord. Nero confirmed Tiridates as king of Armenia and the party returned home but by a different route than than which they had come (Be-

lievers Bible Commentary, Matthew). Matthew may have used this story of Eastern kings paying homage to Nero to establish his new narrative of eastern kings paying homage to Christ as King in opposition to Herod and Nero and all the Caesars – a highly treasonous retelling of a story.

There is much danger and risk in the Christmas story, not only for the pagan wise ones but for gospel writers themselves. They are creating a new narrative for Jesus and one that is dangerously challenging of the status quo. They keep looking back to the prophets, quoting Isaiah and the Psalms for the framework of who Jesus is while looking ahead to what a future kingdom of God may look like in opposition to the Roman Empire. They will bring down the wrath of King Herod and the entire Roman Empire with the claims of Jesus as king and lord. The Magi and Gospel writers alike risked personal safety for a larger vision and conviction planted in their hearts by God. Jesus is at once and the same time the king of the Jews and the long awaited world ruler whom all the nations will honor and serve. Only after the resurrection will Jesus really be able to claim that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. The adoration of the magi, confirms and celebrates Jesus' royal destiny in advance.

The role of the Magi in Christian piety across the centuries has been enormous. Already in the second century they became the subject of early Christian art and the church determined they must be kings and there must have been three of them since there were three gifts as we sing in We Three Kings. A symbolic interpretation of the gifts goes back as far as St. Irenaeus, second century who determined the gold relates to Jesus' kingship, incense to his divinity and myrrh to his suffering. Eventually the church creat-

ed three identities for the Magi – Melchior – an old man with white hair, Caspar a young red-haired man and Balthasar – a bearded black man.

In our Christmas pageants today, the Magi play leading roles along with the angels and shepherds which is a mixing of Luke and Matthew's gospels. The shocking radicalness of Matthew's Magi would be re-enacted in our Christmas pageant if Herod would be cast as a present day ruler, surrounded by consultants in three-piece suits and clerical garb. The magi in turn might consist of persons today who come from the outside and who are looking for a new order – perhaps an ardent feminist, a human rights advocate, maybe even a new age mystic. (Believers Bible Commentary, Matthew) I dare us to try this scene some year.

The Magi follow the star and their conscience to a new king that is a threat to King Herod. There have been such radical acts of courage and conviction to following this new king throughout history and in our modern time – I'd like to highlight three such wisdom seekers. I don't know which are Christian and which are not but hopefully they give us hope and courage by their example.

#1 - Margaret Chase Smith born in 1897 was the first woman to serve in the US Congress and the first woman to be nominated for US President but when speaking about how others would remember her best, she said she hoped it would be for an act that she took in the US Senate on June 1, 1950 when she spoke in condemnation of McCarthyism, when Senator McCarthy had the Senate paralyzed with fear that he would purge any senator who disagreed with him, calling them all communists.

Smith's 1950 speech on the Senate floor, a Declaration of Conscience was a searing reprimand of both her Republican and Democratic colleagues for their moral coward-

ice in not speaking up. She said, “Sitting in silence for fear of retaliation or criticism is dangerous to the country. The right way is not always the popular and easy way. Standing for right when it is unpopular is a true test of moral character. Moral courage always shuns the easy wrong in favour of the difficult right.”

#2 - Doug Cuthand’s editorials in the StarPhoenix finally got moved from the back pages to the Saturday Opinion slot. On November 23, Doug wrote about the Saskatchewan Hockey Association dropping the Blackhawks AAA midget hockey team that was a source of pride and entertainment at Beardy’s First Nation for the past 25 years. The team was valuable for turning out players for junior, university and professional teams, including Fred Saskamoose playing for the NHL.

Quoting Cuthand, “The people of Beardy’s have welcomed fans from opposing teams to their arena and reserve. Many people who had never set foot on a reserve because of fear or lack of opportunity have benefited from the experience of meeting our people on their home turf. Now this opportunity is gone. Next season the rink will be quiet and the AAA level midget players will either be with other teams or not playing the game they love.” As a non-hockey player and non-indigenous person, I appreciate the insights and courage Cuthand brings to our public sphere.

#3 - Speaking at the United Nations Climate Action Summit this summer, 16 year old activist Greta Thunberg made no attempt to ingratiate herself with kings and world leaders. Like a prophet, she was angry and her indictment of those in power was withering: Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth.”

Thunberg's words were designed to disturb us. She pricks my conscience as I plan a flight to Whitehorse next spring to enjoy the Kluane National Park before climate change affects more glaciers there. Patrick and I just bought a new truck with the money we were going to put into solar panels so we struggle with this issue but out of our faith we are trying to do our part by raising our own food and recycling like crazy and wearing Thrift store clothes. Imperfect as they may be, Thunberg, Smith and Cuthand inspire me to be a better Christian, to be really seeking where God's reign is at work in the hockey rink or world around me and to speak courageously about it.

The story of the Magi invites us to wrestle with the question of Jesus' kingship and what that kingship means for particular areas of our faith and life. We live in a world in which various powers clamor for our loyalty. We in turn must make decisions about what powers we will recognize and how much loyalty to offer them. To acclaim Jesus as king is to affirm that his sovereignty is ultimate, and that he has the first and final claim on our loyalties. That is what the homage of the magi is all about. (Believers Bible Matthew, p. 51)

Let us pray...Holy Jesus, before your infant form sages bowed the knee and acknowledged your lordship over all power and wisdom. Grant us also clear vision and courage, that in the light of your light we may devote our power and potential to your service, even when that requires us to go home by another way. Amen.