

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/5/2014, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-2

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson, Matthew 2:11. It is about the Wise Men at the end of their journey:

¹¹and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. (Matthew 2:11, RSV)

May I commend this picture to you as an image of triumph for the wanderer on this earth. The Wise Men have journeyed far, not only in terms of geography, but even more in terms of eternity. One day this Babe of Bethlehem before whom the Wise Men now kneel will grow up and will extend his gracious invitation to a weary world:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28, RSV)

It is as if the Wise Men in this morning's Epiphany story were graced by God to hear this invitation in advance, and then they came a 'running. God bless them, they had no scientific or mathematical proof that the king of the Jews had been born, nor that they should come and worship him. What they seem to have had was an intuition — call it a whisper from God. Whatever it was, they hearkened, and then journeyed all the way to Bethlehem. There, they found a king well worth bending the knee before and worshiping.

Let us cherish the pilgrimage of these Wise Men as an image for us of the one who is beckoned by God and then *responds*. They see the star, understand it to be of divine meaning, pack their camels, and off they go! By the time the Wise Men reached Bethlehem, they might have been weary from their journey. Covered with dust, saddle sore, perhaps bewildered to be in a strange land amidst strange languages, they are unlikely visitors to the Christ Child. But perhaps in their improbability, they are patron saints for each of us who have come to this point in life by our meandering ways, hearkening to whatever divine whisper by which the Lord has summoned us. Like the Wise Men of old, here we are, in church! Here we are in the presence of the Babe of Bethlehem. Soon he will even speak to us in the Blessed Sacrament, giving us his Body and

Blood for the forgiveness of sin. We are following, I say, in the steps of the Wise Men before us, harkening to the invitation of Jesus who says to each of us, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden,” and who receives the wanderer with open arms:

... and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.
(John 6:37, KJV)

OBSTACLES ALONG THE WAY

Certainly there were obstacles along the way for these Wise Men from the East. There were the usual dangers of travel: accidents, storms, robbers, running out of food or water. But let me point to a spiritual obstacle too: From the Bible’s point of view, what the Wise Men were doing was nigh impossible. Even worse, it was impious! For this is the only case in the whole Bible where astrology is given any credence.

Astronomy is okay. That’s science. But astrology is false and impious because it supposes that movement of the stars carries meaning for events here on earth. From the Bible’s point of view, that is sacrilege. That is putting the good things of God’s creation to false uses.

The Bible is consistent and almost revolutionary in its opposition to astrology. The ancient world was often tempted to regard the movement of the stars and the planets as signs of events on earth. Sun and moon and stars aloft there: they move according to some logic, don’t they? — perhaps at the command of the gods, such as Jupiter or Mars or Venus. Can it really be that their movement is of no meaning for humanity?

But the Bible comes along and says, “Leave the poor stars alone. Leave them in peace. They are not preachers about events on earth. They are simply lamps that God hangs in the sky to rule the nighttime and to brighten the day.”

That is, the Bible had a most scientific attitude toward the stars. It denied them divinity or influence or meaning for events on earth. The Bible was content to let the star and the planets move according to the regularities by which God rules his creation. Let the scientist study the stars. Do not gaze at the stars and imagine their movements to have any meaning here on earth.

Yet, in this one case, the movement of the stars *does* have meaning on earth. This star does indeed lead the Wise Men to Jesus. Certainly our Maker is able to do that. Though in general he moves the stars according his own will, without that movement having any meaning for humanity, he could just as well depart from that policy if he wanted to. And in the Epiphany story, he did. Still, it made the journey of the Wise Men to baby Jesus implausible from the point of view of the Bible. If folks back home in Persia thought the wise men were being

fools to head off following a star, the folks in Judah felt the same way, with even more earnestness.

But these Wise Men somehow were able to fight through all the doubts and maybe even mockery of their efforts and to press on toward Jesus anyway.

FIGHTING THROUGH YOUR OWN DOUBTS

You yourselves, my dear friends, might also have had to fight through a lot of doubts, skepticism, opposition, and maybe even mockery in order to arrive where you are here and now: in church, in the presence of the Babe of Bethlehem. Your schools, popular culture, alas even your friends or relatives might look at your churchgoing askance, puzzled why you are doing such a thing. And you might be fairly helpless to give them an answer, for all you are doing is following a godly instinct, harkening to a divine whisper, making your way to Christ. Maybe it was the influence of a godly mother or father — an influence you've never really been able to shake. Maybe it was quiet times reading the Bible that did the trick: you slipped into the strange new world of the Bible, you imagined life with this man Jesus in charge, and you liked what you saw. Maybe it was the influence of a friend who seems solid in morality and in hope, and you see that it is because that one is a Christian. There were obstacles to your journey to the Christ Child, yet here you are. And may God bless you for it!

WISE MEN - PLURAL

Let me mention two other ways in which the Wise Men of the Epiphany story can serve as patron saints for us wanderers on earth who, lo and behold, have ended up here, in the presence of the Christ Child. First, I want to point to the plurality of the Wise Men. And then I want to mention that if these Wise Men are the patron saints of us wanderers, they are like us in not being saints at all! They are simply human beings, with a mixture of goodness and sin. Yet our God loves such mixed beings as we are.

So, first, the plurality of the Wise Men. I mean simply this: The Lord led the Wise Men to the Christ Child — not a Wise Man.¹ That is how it always is: When we journey to Christ, it is always best to seek the company of others. It is no good, then, to stay at home, by yourself, seeking Christ. You might use your time well at home. You might even spend a quiet Sunday morning reading the Bible. But if any of the Wise Men had stayed home reading their Bible, they would have missed the greatest event of their life. They needed to get up and go — literally go to where Christ is. Seeking Christ should not be a solitary

¹ This observation comes from one of the sermons of my pastor from long ago, Rev. Raymond Shaheen, Saint Luke Lutheran Church, Silver Spring, Maryland.

activity. We need fellowship. We need brothers and sisters in Christ. Some of them have been traveling their pilgrimage longer than we have. They have learned things along the way that we have not yet learned. We would do well to seek their company, to be encouraged by their example and to learn what life has taught them.

And going the other way around, we have brothers and sisters in the Lord who could well use *our* company. If the Lord has blessed you with gifts of faith or character or the ability to influence others, then you can count on it: there are people in this world who could benefit from you and from your gifts. But if you stay home, reading in your study alone, they will miss your help.

But chief of all, the Christ you seek is expecting Wise People, not a Wise Person. Christ has promised to be where “two or three are gathered together in my name” — not where one is gathered in his name. That is, Jesus loves the Church. He loves the community of the faithful. He gives his Sacraments to the community. Sacraments are not meant for the solitary, but for the fellowship.

So, you are doing well! You are here in church, with your brothers and sisters in the Lord. You are not a Wise Man, Wise Woman, Wise Boy, or Wise Girl. Rather, you are part of the Wise People who seek Christ.

NOT SAINTS

Finally, let me mention that the Wise Men are not saints. In our brief encounter with them, already we notice their arrogance and the dreadful results of it.

I mean this: All was well so long as the Wise Men followed their star. But they departed from that star, with disastrous consequences. And the star departed from them, for a while.

The Wise Men seem to have traded human wisdom for the star that had guided them so well. They had *almost* reached Bethlehem and the Christ Child, but they fell short because they seem to have figured that a newborn king would be born in a capitol city. So, they went to Jerusalem, right into the palace of murderous King Herod. And in doing this, they unknowingly tipped off Herod about the newborn king, with the awful result of the Massacre of the Innocents. The mothers and fathers of those little boys of Bethlehem have reason to be furious with the Wise Men.

Our text says that when the Wise Men *left* Jerusalem, then the star appeared to them again:

⁹When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰When

they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.
(Matthew 2:9-10, KJV)

I should say so! I should say they did indeed rejoice “with exceeding great joy.” The reappearance of that star meant that the Lord had not abandoned them, but was willing to lead them on, all the way to the Christ Child, even though their error caused the death of innocent children. Their detour to Jerusalem seems to have come from their own fancy ideas about what was fitting for the birth of a king. They lost their star when they followed their own reason, and they did damage in the process. Yet, in the end, they regained the star and followed it all the way to the One before whom they fell down and worshiped.

This matter of losing and regaining the star suggests to me that the Wise Men were not consistent people of faith. Whatever divine revelation had moved them to follow that star, somewhere along the line, they felt they could depart from the star. They felt it would be okay. The star had not led them to Herod’s palace, but they went there anyway, to the sorrow of the little boys of Bethlehem.

In this departure from their path, the Wise Men are like us too: for few of walk with perfection the straight and narrow way:

¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:14, RSV)

Some of us must needs bow our heads and say Amen! to this saying. We might be safe and sound in church today, but also we might have followed many a detour in getting here. We might well have strayed into sin along the way and done some mighty damage in the process. There are grey-haired saints in this congregation, or any congregation, who could testify that they do not regret a day following Christ, but that, alas, they do regret days that they did not follow Christ with even more integrity.

If so, we are in the company of the Wise Men. They are wise not in that they are perfect or sinless, but in that they seek Jesus Christ. And when they detour from their good path, they shake themselves off, get back up on their camels, look for their star again, and head off to Him.

Let us be like them. Whenever we find that we have fallen into sin, whenever we have done something unworthy of our baptisms, even if we detoured in all innocence, let us leave wicked Herod’s palace and journey on to Bethlehem and to Bethlehem’s Christ Child, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.