

Tom James

January 6, 2008

Epiphany

Matthew 2.1-12

“And then it stopped.”

I get the feeling the star wasn't the only thing that was wandering. Birds of a feather, they say. A person's mindset is often her reality, and maybe the wandering star caught the attention of these three because they were the types that would notice wandering things. We probably all have pictures of the wise men, or “magi,” in our heads. Undoubtedly these images are influenced by figurines and children's Christmas pageants, and maybe old Bible story books.

But I have been thinking about what might have been their personality profiles. Maybe they were very different from each other. Likely that was so—it is hard to imagine three people all being exactly alike. Two of them were hand-gladding extroverts, perhaps, and the third was painfully shy. Or one was chipper, one dreamy, and the third morose. Or maybe they were of different ages or from different family backgrounds. The possible temperaments and proclivities and inclinations, and the combinations of these, are of course endless. But one thing they seem to have shared is a certain readiness to hit the road. Their feet weren't glued to wherever they lived in the East, you might say. They were adventuresome, willing to take risks to discover new truths; hungry, perhaps, for new experiences and revelations.

In other words, they were what we now call “seekers.” Eminent sociologist Wade Clark Roof wrote a book a few years ago called *A Generation of Seekers* in which he described the religious sensibilities of the baby-boom generation and how they differ so profoundly from their elders. Roof says that baby-boomers are much more mobile than previous generations, geographically and also spiritually. They are less likely to have their feet glued to a denomination or a tradition. They are more likely to treat religious participation as another of many choices they can make on the basis of felt needs or longings of the heart. They are far more likely to change religious affiliations multiple times as their own personal spiritual quest takes them in different directions. In other words, they are wanderers, in a sense—people for whom religion is something to think about and not simply accept; people for whom faith is something to decide about and not simply take for granted; people for whom faith has to be something one's own rather than somebody else's. These are thoughtful women and men—you might even say “wise.”

So, these three ancient baby-boomers from the great kingdoms of the world followed a wandering star into beleaguered little Palestine. They weren't satisfied by what they had back East, and they were sure there was something more, somewhere. They didn't have fulfillment, but they did have faith. Their faith was a big part of their motivation, and also a big part of what made them wise. After all, they could have simply accepted what they had. They could have rested complacent, or repeated to themselves over and over again that it doesn't get any better than this. They could have remained children in faith, accepting what others gave them and not asking any questions or going on any wild goose chases. They could have applied elmers' glue to their shoes and stayed put, as their parents may have liked.

I think that there's a big part of our Presbyterian hearts that are suspicious and resentful of wise men and women. Partly, that's because we don't much like people who appear to be wafflers. But partly it's because the wisdom of these people seems to be leading them elsewhere. For many wise women and men, we are the “somewhere in the East” and not the stable in Bethlehem. We are unsatisfying religion that they are taking leave of as they continue their quests elsewhere. The truth is, we want them to stay put, to end their search right here. We want them to accept our faith, and not keeping looking for one of their own.

Of course, the star did stop. It didn't keep wandering across the skies all winter long and then fade into forgetfulness with the celebrations of Spring. It stopped. At Bethlehem, the quest came to an end. The wise men found what they were looking for. And before they had even approached the stable, they rejoiced.

But, you know, another thing I wonder about is what happened to the wise men after they left the stable. We are told that they "went home by another way." Poet T.S. Eliot imagines them after they are back home being struck by the strangeness of their own people, "clutching their foreign gods." In other words, the wise men were different after they had experienced the stable in Bethlehem. And this meant that their journey, the quest, wasn't over, in a way, because they now had to make sense of their lives anew. Everything looked different in light of having met Jesus. Everything in their lives would have to be reordered, readjusted to fit their new faith.

I want to make two points about this. The first is, I'm afraid the wise women and men of our day are right. I love Presbyterianism, but it doesn't mean much if it is someone else's faith, and too often we think of it precisely as someone else's. It's what you accept, what grounds you, what makes you feel comfortable and secure. And its power to be that seems to depend on your not messing with it. We recite someone else's creeds and sing someone else's hymns and listen to someone else's words. There's no seeking after a faith our own, or if there is we are quiet about it, as if it is somehow shameful or out of place. But if we want to be Bethlehem, a place where people find joy, rather than somewhere in the unnamed East from which they are running as fast as they can, we need to be a place where people experience God for themselves, and that means we need to be a place where *we* experience God for *ourselves*. We need an epiphany.

And the second point is simply this. The star stopping doesn't mean that the journey is over. Having witnessed Christ's birth, we need to go back East and be witnesses. Having experienced joy, we need to reinterpret our experience and reorder our priorities in light of it. We need to identify the "strange gods" that people are clutching and make sure their heads are not still poking out of our backpacks. That's a journey that never ends, and that's what the rest of the Christian calendar, and indeed the Christian life, is all about. Amen.