"Lessons from the Wise Men"

A STORY IS TOLD of a New Englander who was traveling through Texas at Christmas time. In a small Texas town this man came upon one of the most beautiful outdoor nativity creches he had ever seen.

The nativity figures were life-size and crafted with great care. Bathed in a rich golden light, this scene was almost magical under the dark starry night.

But there was one thing about this creche which bothered this man. He noticed that all three of the wise men were wearing firemen's helmets. The man walked through the cold night air, to inquire about this at a nearby country store.

Behind the store's counter, a woman with steely-blue eyes listened to his question. Then she shook her head with disdain, as she said:

You dern Yankees. Don't you ever read your Bible?

Thereupon she pulled out a well-worn Bible from behind the counter. Riffling through it, she soon found the page she wanted. Jabbing her finger on a text, she exclaimed:

Here it is, in Matthew Chapter 2. It says: "and the wise men came from afar"

That's a humorous little story about regional dialects. I'm sure we New Englanders are just as vulnerable to such humor, when it comes to our regional dialect of logs, fogs, and the infamous "park your car in Harvard yard."

THIS MORNING IS EPIPHANY SUNDAY. It is the time in the Christian Church year, when many Western Christians remember the wise men of old, and their wondrous journey "over field and fountain, moor and mountain" to see the new King from God, who had been born on Bethlehem's plain.
The story of the wise men is relatively short, and found in only one of our New Testament books. But that story has stirred imaginations and been a special symbol of our faith, down through the centuries.

My purpose this morning is to reflect on that story a bit, so we can better understand its significance.

THE FIRST QUESTION many people will ask, is if this story is really true. They wonder if it might not be just a beautiful tale spun by early Christians, in order to convey some theological truths.

Well, of course, no one can answer that question with 100% certainty. But my personal inclination is to believe that the story of the wise men has some basis in historical fact.

Consider the evidence: In Matthew’s Gospel, the English words "wise men" are a translation of the Greek word "Magi." Historians know that there used to be men called Magi. Going back as far as 500 years before Christ, Magi were priests in Persia who followed the religion of Zoroaster, known as Zoroastrianism.

By the time of Jesus, the word Magi had been expanded to describe men of various cultures who were considered mysterious and highly learned—especially in secret and occult arts.

Around the time of Jesus, some Magi practiced magic. Some served kings and rulers by traveling to foreign lands as official envoys and gift-bearers. For example, Pliny, the Roman historian, talks about Magi who traveled to Rome in 66 AD, both to honor Nero and to deliver their predictions about his rule.

Many Magi of that period seem to have had contacts with the upper echelons of their societies. They counseled kings and some may even have been royal family members. Typically, those Magi were skilled in astrology and the interpretation of prophecies.
In light of that historical context, it doesn't seem far-fetched that men called Magi would be traveling to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, in search of a Jewish king whose birth had been prophesied.

NOW HERE'S A QUESTION which might surprise you. Whose prophecies were these Magi in Matthew's Gospel following? Were they following the writings of a Hebrew prophet, such as Micah in the 8th century B.C., who predicted that a Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David?

OR, were they following a prophecy of Zoroaster, the prophet from Persia who lived in the 6th century B.C.? There is a tantalizing line in one of the so-called "apocryphal gospels" which never made it into the canon of our New Testament.

That "apocryphal gospel" is called the "Arabic Gospel of the Infancy." It is later, and presumably much less reliable than our New Testament Gospels. But in its telling of the Nativity story, that apocryphal gospel has this intriguing line. It says:

Some magi came to Jerusalem according to the prediction of Zoroaster.

We wonder, could that be true?

IN THE CENTURIES after Jesus's birth, a good many Christians believed that the wise men were, in fact, emissaries from Persia and its Zoroastrian religion.

That common belief is reflected in an historic event. In 614 A.D., Persian troops swept through Palestine, destroying Christian churches. The one church they spared was the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. That church is built over the limestone cave where ancient tradition says Jesus was born.

The Persians spared that church in 614, not because they loved Christianity. They spared it, because on its walls there was a large mosaic which showed the wise men as Persians,
dressed in the traditional Persian clothing style, which consisted of belted tunics, full sleeves, and trousers.

IF THE WISE MEN really were Zoroastrian priests from Persia, then the account of their visit to the baby Jesus takes on this added significance.

This story can then be read as a symbol of the Zoroastrian faith recognizing that Jesus, not Zoroaster, was the greatest revelation of God to our world. Or, to put it another way, it can be read as a symbol of the inherent superiority of Christianity to Zoroastrianism.

There are other scholarly theories as to where the wise men came from. It’s possible that they came from Arabia. They may also have come from Babylonia, which was famous in the ancient world for its study of the heavens.

Whatever the correct answer to that question, there’s one thing which virtually all Christian scholars agree on. They agree that wherever the wise men came from, they were Gentiles, not Jews. In this respect, Matthew’s wise men have long been a symbol for the Christian Church.

They have long symbolized the belief that Jesus was sent into our world, to save all people—not just one or only some groups of people.

As you know, Christianity was born within the matrix of Judaism. Jesus appeared on earth within the context of ancient Jewish culture and prophecy. But as the story of the wise men indicates, when Jesus came into our world, God called even Gentile foreigners to be among those who worshiped Jesus.

SO WHAT DOES THAT have to do with us Christians today? Out of prejudice or ignorance, we modern Christians may be inclined to reject certain groups or types of people.

We may be inclined to turn our backs on people we consider to be strangers or outsiders to us. But then, as the story of the wise men reminds us, those strangers, those outsiders,
those foreigners from afar, may be the very people whom God is
calling, to join with us at Christ’s cradle.

Do you recall Edward Markham’s famous poem, entitled
“Outwitted”? It goes like this:

He drew a circle that shut me out--
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout--
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

And so it is with God’s love. At the first Christmas, God drew
a huge circle, which counted those foreign wise men in. And
so we Christians should do with our love. When it comes to
our fellow human beings, we should draw huge circles of
inclusion--not small circles of exclusion!

As it happened, that symbolic truth found within the story of
the wise men had a life of its own. For centuries after
Matthew created his Gospel, various legends were created
which portrayed the wise men as being three in number.

In fact, Matthew didn’t say how many wise men came. He only
said they brought three different kinds of gifts. Those
later legends also portrayed each of those wise men as
being from a different country, and sometimes even of a
different race.

For example, those legends have sometimes thought of those
wise men as: Melchior, from Babylon; Caspar, from Persia;
and Balthazar, from an Arab country. Alternately, Caspar
has sometimes been thought of as being a black man from
Africa.

HERE’S ANOTHER WAY in which the story of the wise men is
significant today. The fact is that most Christianity today
is rooted in Gentile culture, not Jewish culture. Thus,
because the wise men were the first Gentiles who came to
Christ’s cradle, they are, in a sense, the spiritual
forbears of most of us modern Christians today.

NOW LET’S TALK ABOUT the Bethlehem Star. That star is
sometimes thought of in supernatural terms, as a bright light moving along in the heavens which much of the world could see and understand as a sign of the Messiah's birth.

The problem with that common interpretation, is that there is no indication in the Bible—or anywhere else for that matter—that anyone other than those wise men saw such a star or understood its messianic significance.

As you will recall, from Matthew's Gospel account, the wise men arrived in Jerusalem, to find that King Herod knew nothing of this star or its significance.

Herod was so ignorant of what was going on, that he even had to ask his advisors, as to where Hebrew prophecy said the Messiah would be born.

HERE'S THE WAY I interpret this story. The Bethlehem Star was likely an astronomical event which was observed by people who were used to studying the heavens. The average person of that time, might not have even noticed that celestial event.

Quite possibly, the Bethlehem Star was a conjunction of planets. However, whatever that celestial event was, it was of great importance to the Magi. That event was important to the Magi, not in itself alone, but because of the faith the Magi brought to that event.

Whether the original source of their faith was Hebrew or Persian, it appears that the Magi had a strong faith in God and faith in the promise that God would send a Messiah into our world.

--That strong faith likely kept the Magi looking in the skies, night after night, for a sign from God.
--That strong faith also led the Magi to recognize the Messianic significance of that heavenly sign from God, when it finally did come.
--And, that strong faith led those Magi to undertake a great journey over "field and fountain," as the famous hymn says, to find that newly-born Messiah from God.
Make no mistake about it, as difficult as their travel might have been, the journey of those wise men to Bethlehem was first and foremost, a spiritual journey. It was a journey of the heart.

For it was their faith, not their proficiency at star-gazing, which ultimately was responsible for bringing them to the baby Jesus.

TO MY MIND, this is another way in which the story of the wise men is meaningful to us Christians today. For this story from Matthew’s Gospel teaches us, that it is very important in life to have faith. For having faith can make a real difference! For example:

--By having faith, we modern Christians are stirred and made eager to look for the presence of God’s love in our world. In turn, that eagerness to look for God’s love, keeps our lives open and filled with hope, even when we are in the midst of life’s disappointments and hardships.

--Also, by having faith, we modern Christians are often able to recognize when God’s love is uplifting our lives, and also moving through us, as we share that love with others.

I believe that people of faith see life much differently, than people who have no faith. To any other ancient star-gazer, the Bethlehem Star may have seemed like just another interesting celestial event.

But to the wise men, who looked at the sky through their faith, they recognized that event was a sign from God. They recognized, that their world was on the threshold of a great transformation which God was initiating.

--By having faith, we modern Christians are empowered to make spiritual journeys, journeys of the heart.

Our faith empowers us to respond to the tug of God’s spirit in our lives. Our faith empowers us to take the risk of reaching out to others with love.
Our faith empowers us to strive for great ideals and great accomplishments which serve God.

Yes, it really does take faith to follow a star. That was true 2,000 years ago, and it’s just as true today.

THIS MORNING IS EPIPHANY SUNDAY. Let us remember the wise men. Let us remember the mystery of those strange men who came from afar to worship the Christ Child and to bring him fine gifts.

Let us also take to heart the special meanings which we can find in their visit. For those wise men can teach us modern Christians at least two things.

First, they can teach us that there are no outsiders to God’s love.

And second, they can teach us that having faith in God, really can make a great deal of difference to our lives. As with the wise men, that faith can even send us on special journeys of the heart.