

“Three Wise Men Stuck in Two Worlds”  
Matthew 2: 1-12  
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Are you sick of Christmas? I would imagine that most of you out there are pretty darn sick of Christmas by today, January 3<sup>rd</sup>. If you're not sick of Christmas at this point, well, you're strange. At Christmas time we are so bombarded with *Christmas* that it's all too easy to grow weary of it. It's like how I used to love English toffee, until my grandmother made me a huge tin of it and I ate it all in one night. Needless to say I got really sick and now twenty years later I still can't eat English toffee. I must confess also that I once again this year overdosed on Christmas music. Every year, on the day after Thanksgiving I get really excited because we're allowed to listen to Christmas music again and I make a half dozen mix CDs with my favorite songs and I listen to them over and over. I also keep the car radio tuned to the “all-Christmas-music station.” And by December 19<sup>th</sup> or so I can barely stomach “Jingle Bells,” but like a marathon runner, I have to keep pressing on and keep listening for another week because soon the music will be taken away again and I'll have go without “Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree” for another year. This habit always leads to an overdose, which I regret, and then repeat again the next year.

But all of this is to say though that in the traditional Christian liturgical calendar, the season of Christmas actually starts on Christmas day. Everything before it is Advent. We are right now in the Christmas season, and this is the second Sunday of Christmas. The season doesn't end until twelve days after Christmas Day (hence the song), which is Epiphany. This is one of the instances where the traditional Christian liturgical calendar diverges greatly from the American seasonal calendar. Epiphany is the day the church celebrates Jesus' appearance, the appearance of God in human form. In some branches of Christianity, this is the bigger holiday. It's also the time where we recognize the visit of the wise men. Wise men? Aren't we done with that?

Didn't we celebrate that enough at the Christmas pageant. Yes, probably so. But since we're all tired of Christmas, we actually have a great opportunity to take a more critical look at the story of the wise men. When we're fully enmeshed in the Christmas spirit, it's hard to take a fresh or scholarly look at our biblical stories. The story of the wise men is one that is so heavily intertwined with tradition and creative supplementation, that it's difficult to see what the story is really saying. So, forgoing the Christmas spirit, I want you to forget everything that you know about the story of the wise men. Forget it all, and listen freshly for the word of God. Feel free to follow along in your pew Bibles as I read Matthew 2:1-12.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called <sup>7</sup>for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

So, you've now forgotten everything you know about the wise men and you've heard the story in a fresh way. Right? So, what are some things that we can see in a new way in this story? First, the wise men didn't necessarily visit on the day or night of Jesus' birth. It was after. In fact, their visit might have come as much as two years after Jesus' birth. Later in the story, when Herod orders the execution of babies in Bethlehem, he orders it for all children two and under. So Jesus might have been two. Next, how many wise men were there? No idea. We only talk about three because there were three gifts. There might have been fewer wise men, or maybe more. The biggest question though is what exactly is a wise man? The NRSV calls them wise men. Many songs call them the three kings. Some Bible translations call them the "scholars." The Greek word however is Magi, a word for which we don't have a parallel. A Magi was a number of things. They were not Jewish and they were possibly Zoroastrian, which is a Persian religion. They were astronomers, pseudo-chemists, wizards of sorts, and they gathered information about the future from watching the stars. They were a kind of scholar, who studied history and its unfolding. Their practices were most often in service to kings and rulers, as in ancient times, before the Enlightenment, magical types were very well respected. So the closest analogue that we have today, forgoing all of the magical elements, is that they were consultants. They used their knowledge to consult powerful people. You could say that they're like the Presidential Cabinet. They helped those in power make decisions. And since they worked with people of power, they had their own power and wealth. These magi present incredibly expensive gifts to Jesus, which shows that they were influential people who had great resources. They stand in stark contrast to the poor and destitute Holy Family.

So these Magi come looking for the new King of Israel, as they're led by a star. Their first stop seems quite logical, although the writer of Matthew casts it in an ironic light. They first go to the king of the land, Herod, who, according to history, was a murderer and a scoundrel. It makes sense that they'd look for a king amongst other kings. As people of power themselves

they seek out another person of power. But they are way off. They are in absolutely the wrong place. Jesus was not born in Herod's palace, but in a stable. So Herod's advisors direct the Magi to Bethlehem. They follow the star and end up finding Jesus, and I would guess, a very surprised family. What's interesting though is that they don't say "what, this can't be the new king. Why isn't he in a palace?" What Matthew writes is that the Magi joyously worship Jesus, even though he's in humble Bethlehem. These men respond properly to Jesus, to their credit. They are wealthy and powerful men and they bow down and give homage to a poor baby, born to a poor family.

And that's the end of the story of the Magi. We don't hear from them again. But since this is such an odd story, with strange details, the Christian church has extrapolated upon it greatly and created back-stories for the Magi. In the Jewish tradition this is called Midrash, creative story telling that fills in the gaps of Scripture. My favorite Midrash on this story is T.S. Elliot's poem "Journey of the Magi." Elliot, whom you might know from high school English class, was a 20<sup>th</sup> century modernist poet who wrote "The Wasteland" and other poetic masterpieces. He converted to Christianity in 1927 and then wrote this poem. It's from the perspective of one of the Magi, who looks back on his journey to find Christ. While it's not wholly accurate to the Bible, it does give insight into the process of conversion, and it expounds on the Magi's experience of meeting Jesus. The poem is included in your bulletin. It's fairly short, so let's take a look at it together.

'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.'  
And the camels galled, sore-footed,  
refractory, Lying down in the  
melting snow. There were times  
we regretted the summer palaces  
on slopes, the terraces,  
and the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing  
and grumbling and running away,  
and wanting their liquor and women,  
and the night-fires going out,  
and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the

towns unfriendly And the villages dirty and charging high prices: A hard time we had of it. At the end we preferred to travel all night, sleeping in snatches, With the voices in our ears, saying That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley, Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation; with a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness, and three trees on the low sky, And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow. Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel, six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver, And feet kicking the empty wine-skins. But there was no information, and so we continued and arrived at evening, not a moment too soon Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember, and I would do it again, but set down this set down this: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was a birth; certainly, we had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods. I should be glad of another death.

Obviously this is a very rich poem, with lots of images and symbols. I'm not going to go into all of it. You can take it with you and have poetry analysis time over the lunch table this afternoon. But the basic message of the poem is this: this wealthy and powerful Magi, who has lived a comfortable life, goes on a rough journey and meets the Christ child. This encounter leaves him changed, and when he returns to his home he's no longer comfortable in his privileged position. He's caught between two worlds. His lavish life seems meaningless after he encounters the poor baby who will be king. His life is turned around and he's not so sure what to do. He's so unsure that he actually looks forward to death. Like I said, this is creative interpretation of the short

Biblical story, but it leads me to ask the question, do you ever feel like this Magi? Do you ever feel like you're caught in two worlds? I know I have.

In high school, early in my life of discipleship, I attended a youth group that brought in kids from lots of different schools and I was actually the only person from my school who attended. This was neat because it allowed me to branch out and meet new people, but it also gave me the option to have two identities. I had my church identity, where I was kind to people, showed religious devotion, showed patience and tolerance. And then I had my school identity. With no one from the youth group around, I was free to be a jerk, put people down, and not act like such a great disciple of Christ. I was living in two worlds: my church life and my school life. As you can see, that wasn't a good way to be. Now my guess is that we've all felt this way at one time or another in our lives of discipleship. The process of faith formation is a tricky one, and it requires us to make great changes. We are called to live one life, focused on Christ, not multiple lives, fractured by competing loyalties.

So in Elliot's poem the Magi meets Jesus and his life is upended. Stuck in two worlds, he hopes for death. My hope is that we can do a little bit better. If we're struggling with living in two worlds, there has to be a better solution than just hoping to die. So what might that solution look like? Well, sadly, I don't have a 5 point plan for eliminating a double life. I wish I did. I could probably write a book and become famous for it. But I do believe the first step would be to affirm that we are all saved by grace. We are not loved by God because we are good people. We do not have God's favor because we live exemplary lives free from sin. Quite the opposite. We all deal with sin and have sin in our lives, but God continues to love us, despite our shortcomings. When we accept grace we can accept that we are complex beings who change and grow and develop, and that our life of discipleship is a journey that we're taking. We all have room for growth. Change is a good thing. Another step is to affirm that God wants us fully engaged in the kingdom of God. Being a disciple of Jesus is a holistic lifestyle. It affects every aspect of our lives. It takes time to get there, but that's what God wants,

our whole lives, not just a part of it. And that life is a glorious life. It's tough, but the best life that we can have. Beyond that, I don't have any advice for how to eliminate a double world. We all have unique situations and unique challenges in our lives of faith. So talk to God. Ask God to show you how you can become fully engaged in God's vision for the world. Ask God to direct your life onto a single path, without competing loyalties. Ask God to expose the contradictions in your life that inhibit you from deepening your life of discipleship. There are no easy answers, but we do believe in a God who is faithful in helping God's disciples grow in faith.

So the wise men, the Magi, were odd gentlemen. They didn't fit the stereotypical Christ-worshipper. They were men from a different world than the poor infant Jesus, but they fell down and honored him none the less. T.S. Elliot creatively interprets that the Magi might have struggled with their experience of meeting Christ. Any encounter with Christ throws one into awareness of our excesses, our injustices, our shortcomings. Like the Magi, we might be stuck in two worlds. But Christ has invited us into his world, a sometimes crazy upside-down world where kings are born in barns, but a world filled with joy and meaning. So let's embrace that invitation. Amen.