

“They Came from the East”

In Matthew 2:1-12, we have the story of the wise men which come from the East to pay their respects to Jesus. As I have talked about before, the wise men were not there at the time of Jesus’ birth. They came later after they had seen the star. Some estimates are they arrived about two years after Jesus’ birth, but the exact time is unknown. What we do know is they were gentiles, bringing respect from other parts of the world to the King of the Jews, who was the King of the world. The positive thing about this text for Epiphany is the depiction of an extraordinary hope, the peoples of the world coming together united in their recognition of what’s important, all offering gifts to the ruler of the universe.

The wise men had to have great wealth in order to travel great distances and to afford the food, water, camels, etc. to make the trip. Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh indicate wealth. The fact that they could take this much time from their livelihoods also indicates they had resources. The fact they would travel this far shows the significance of Jesus’ birth.

Matthew says they are “from the East,” which could have been Persia or southern Arabia, both of which are east of Palestine. Tradition has intervened such as they are depicted as being from different parts of Africa, Asia or Europe. Indeed, given that Jerusalem can be seen to be at the intersection of these three

great continents, it is easy to understand how these three could come to represent the three portions of the known world coming together to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews.

The wise men who came to pay their respects to Jesus may well have been astronomers, astrologers, or some other form of stargazer. Sometimes they are depicted with an astrolabe or some other form of scientific instrument in addition to their gifts. What I want us to look at is the interconnection between exploration and the hope that humans can work together to bring about the better world envisioned by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.

In preparing for this sermon, I read a reflection by Rev. David Keck, a chaplain at the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida. He writes that when he thinks of humanity getting its act together, overcoming differences, and working together for a better future, he thinks of *Star Trek* and its original producer, Gene Roddenberry. I have always been a huge *Star Trek* fan. The show came out when I was in the first grade and I have been watching it ever since, including all the television sequels and the movies.

Rev. Keck points out that the casting of the crew of the *Enterprise*, the starship in *Star Trek*, was a political statement. Roddenberry, in creating this television series in the 1960s during Civil Rights struggles, the Cold War, and anti-

Vietnam protests in the United States, wanted to illustrate how humans of different cultures and countries could work together. The bridge of the starship depicted officers from different continents of the earth. Chief engineer Montgomery Scott was from Scotland, helmsman Chekov was from Russia, and helmsman Sulu was from Japan. First officer Spock was born of an interstellar marriage, that of a Vulcan father and Earth mother, which was probably a statement against the ban on interracial marriage in the United States which was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1967 in Loving v. Virginia.

Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the power of the casting of different races working together. Nichelle Nichols, an African-American woman who played Lieutenant Uhura and was the chief communications officer on the *Enterprise*, was thinking of not returning for a second season of the show. King pointed out to her how important it was to see an African-American help lead a starship. She returned to the show and all the movie sequels.

Just as the wise men travelling to see the baby Jesus was a symbol of a better future, space exploration always remains a symbol of a better future. Rev. Keck shares how he attended an interfaith conference where a speaker was talking about what gave him hope. He projected a picture of the earth taken from one of the Mars rovers. That humans can work together, send a technological marvel so far away

and then take a selfie encouraged him to dream about a world no longer divided by violence, racism, and partisan politics.

Among this message of hope, though, let us not forget that stargazing and space exploration involve politics and religion. The first person in space, Yuri Gagarin, is said to have declared he went up there and didn't see God. For good Soviets in the communist years, astronomy and space exploration were part of their larger propaganda effort. Officially, the Soviet system denied the existence of God. The full text from Matthew today reminds us that science can be used for political machinations. When King Herod hears of the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem and their questions about stars and the birth of a king, he understands that the stakes are high. Indeed, the hopeful question of the Magi, "where is the child?" (2:2) will ultimately lead to the murder of many children and Mary and Joseph's flight to Egypt with the Christ child. Herod's deception of the "wise" men (he tricks them into giving him information about where Jesus was born) is a depressing reminder of how wickedness can manipulate science (think of all the weapons of war we have created to kill each other).

The manifestation of God to the gentile nations represented by these Magi is something to celebrate, as is the human exploration of God's creation. But the fact that the story of following a sign in the heavens also leads to the powers and

principalities, to racism and murder, should not be too surprising. As the hymn “We Three Kings” reminds us, Jesus will receive not only the gold of royalty and the frankincense of deity, but also the “bitter perfume” of myrrh. Alleluias will “sound throughout the earth and the skies” for the babe who will be all three---not just king of the cosmos, not just God of the universe, but also the sacrifice that a broken, sinful humanity desperately needs.

On the bulletin cover is the picture “Earthrise,” which was taken by astronaut Bill Anders from the command module of Apollo 8 as it came around the moon on Christmas Eve in 1968. This photo shows the beauty of the Earth but also how vulnerable the Earth can be to the violence that humans can inflict on each other and on God’s creation. It illustrates how important it is for us to live in peace with each other, with those of all cultures and all races. As the astronauts of Apollo 8 read the creation story from Genesis, let us celebrate how the birth of the Christ child restored to us the Paradise lost and put us back in the relationship with God, with each other and with creation which God intended.