

The Gospel According to the Magi

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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We saw it in that peaceful sect called the Amish. They are devout people, and believe in family, community, simplicity; and they abhor violence. They will not serve in the military, draw Social Security, or accept government assistance. They take literally the teachings of the Bible, such as this teaching from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

They were tested on October 2, 2006. A milk truck driver entered their one room schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, dismissed all the boys, and shot execution style ten girls between the ages of six and thirteen. He then turned the gun on himself. He was married and had three young children. His wife, of course, was horrified when she learned of the unspeakable thing her husband had done. Members of the Amish community, knowing that she too was in great anguish, visited her and assured her that they forgave her husband. They even attended his funeral. In fact, fifty percent of the people at the gunman’s funeral were Amish.

That is radical forgiveness—the gospel according to the Amish.

We saw it among our early forefathers and mothers—the Baptists. They too were devout people and passionately believed their interpretation of the Bible. For faith to be real, they taught that it must be freely chosen, not forced upon them by the state or the church. Their churches, they claimed, must be free to set their own direction. No pope. No bishops. No heavy-handed clergy. Every Baptist church is fully autonomous, they insisted, and must exist under the lordship of Jesus Christ alone. They granted the same freedom to individuals. The king must not meddle in the affairs of the human conscience, they demanded. You are your own priest, they said to each other. You don’t

have to rely on a king or a priest sanctioned by the state. Take your Bible and before God Almighty determine for yourself what is truth. They called it the priesthood of every believer, your right and responsibility to deal directly with God.

That is unfettered freedom—the gospel according to the Baptists.

We see another example in Matthew 2. It is uncompromised devotion—the gospel according to the magi.

Like the Amish and the early Baptists, the magi appear to be devout people. Unfortunately, poets and artists have overly sentimentalized their story. We sing “we three kings of are,” while the text in Matthew never says there were three or that they were kings. So I want to try to extract this story from hymn 185 and highlight its powerful message of uncompromised devotion.

So let’s begin with the text, not the hymn. Notice first in the text how passive the Holy Family is. Joseph is not even present. Mary is present and seen, but not heard. The Christ Child does nothing, but presumably be adorable, which is appropriate for an infant. We should be aware that there are other writings from this time about extraordinary children. These children are depicted doing extraordinary things. For example, one child speaks long before a child would be mature enough to speak. It is presented as a miracle. A writing about the infant prophet Elijah says he was given flames of fire to eat. He too was presented as a miracle baby. But we see none of this extraordinary behavior in the story from Matthew.

Instead all the action centers around the nameless strangers from the east. Matthew calls them the *magoi*. We call them the magi. Scholars believe the magi were probably astrologers, not kings. Remember, their visit was prompted by their observation of the stars. “We observed his star at its rising,” they said.

So what else do we know about these nameless strangers? We know they came from the east, which means they were not Jewish. This is important: they were Gentiles. One writer calls them “Gentiles in the extreme....” (*NIB*, Vol. VIII, p. 145)

One more thing we know about them: they gave three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were extravagant gifts, and it may have taken a dozen or more astrologers to afford such lavish gifts. Gold we are familiar with. Fragrant substances, like frankincense and myrrh, were often imported from distant lands at great expense. They were all gifts fit for a king.

Let me pause for a moment and point out something else that's important. The story of King Herod is a subplot in this narrative. He is presented as an insecure, devious leader. When he heard that magi had come to worship "the king of the Jews," he was "troubled," Matthew notes. Why, he was king! How could there be any king other than Herod? So he tried to trick the magi, telling them to go to Bethlehem to worship this infant king. Then he asked them to send word back to him, so that he too could go and worship the Christ Child, though his real intentions were not worship.

The magi left. They followed the star they had seen in the east. It went before them, Matthew says, until it came to rest over the place where the Christ Child lay. Matthew's words are much better than mine:

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Seven important words: they knelt down and paid him homage. That is the gospel according to the magi: uncompromised devotion. They were foreigners. Gentiles. Astrologers. Traveling a great distance. Dealing with an insecure, devious king. And they knelt down and paid him homage. They worshipped the Christ Child, thereby foreshadowing what Paul described to the Philippians:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The gospel according to the Amish reminds us of how difficult our faith can be. They got it right. Jesus calls us to practice radical forgiveness. That is what he said in the Sermon on the Mount. If we want to be forgiven, we must forgive. The gospel according to the Baptists reminds us of the necessity of religious liberty. They got it right. We must practice unfettered freedom. Our churches must be free. Individuals must be free. If our faith is to be real, it must be freely chosen.

The gospel according to the magi holds before us another essential of our faith: uncompromised devotion. They got it right too. They knelt down and paid him homage. They didn't simply admire the star. They didn't study it. They followed it, and worshipped the Christ Child. Their story calls us to uncompromised devotion too. That, in my opinion, is far more important than hymn 185.

You know, we're a pretty cerebral church, and that's a good thing. Our faith needs to be critically informed. We're committed to social justice. We've taken a stand for the gay community. We're committed to healthy race relations. We welcome immigrants. We build affordable housing. That's all good. The magi hold before us something completely different: worship. When was the last time we knelt down and paid homage to our Lord? When was the last time we traveled a great distance and gave extravagant gifts as an expression of our devotion? As we begin a new year, let us follow their lead. That is the gospel according to the magi.

Closing Prayer

Lord, love seems a paltry word. It is tied up with romance. We use it to describe food we like. But it may be the best word we have to describe our devotion. We love you and bless your name. Amen.