

Long ago, and yet today, in the time of Governor Jennifer Granholm, ruler of all of Michigan, wise men from Detroit came to Lansing.

Three kings of our time took a trip to the State Capitol:

King Rick from General Motors

King Mike from Little Caesars'

King Professor Walter from Wayne State University.

-all caravanning together up I-96 in black, chauffeured Cadillacs.

Coming to see the governor -- coming to ask directions!

When the three wise men arrived at the Governor's mansion -- they were immediately granted an audience

And King Professor Edwards asked Governor Granholm straight out -- "Where is the man who has just announced he is running a recall campaign and will soon be declared Governor of Michigan?"

"We have all heard about his arrival from a star."

"Actually," interrupted the auto executive, "We heard about it from OnStar."

When Governor Granholm heard this news, she was frightened and furious -- not only because she drove a Ford -- but because of the thin ice all of Michigan knows she's on these days -- and to think that a rival was now on the scene, waiting in the wings, plotting her demise, was more than a bit disturbing.

"A recall effort!" she thought -- "That may force me to balance the budget!"

So calling together all her chief strategists, advisors and consultants, Governor Granholm inquired of them:

Where could a political rival possibly be coming from? ...nowhere in Lansing that she knew of.....and to unseat her, she thought, would take a God!

So her advisors told her this:

"Our polling says there is a candidate in Paw Paw, of Van Buren County

"That makes sense!" thought the Governor -- after all, God spelled backwards, is Dog...

Then the Governor secretly called for the wise men from Detroit -- and learned more from King Rick and King Mike and King Professor Walter about what, exactly, the OnStar was telling them

Then, satisfied, she sent them on their way -- to Paw Paw,

Feigning concern, she bid them:

"Go and search diligently for this well-qualified leader -- and when you have found him, bring word to me so that I may also go and contribute to his political action campaign."

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When the three wise men heard this, King Rick, and King Mike, and King Professor Edwards got in their black, chauffeur-driven Cadillacs and caravanned to the southwest -- following that friendly OnStar voice -- “Turn Left onto I-69.”

Finally they arrived in the Van Buren County seat -- and caused no small stir when they pulled in. -- Children followed them on bicycles -- farmers left their plows and started jogging along the shoulder of the road -- as the three wise men pulled in front of the house their OnStar had identified.

Each one then popped the trunk and grabbed the gifts they had packed -- they knew well their worldly success had come, to no small degree, from a little greasing of the political palm every now and again.

So, King Rick brought keys to a new Hummer -- King Mike brought box seat tickets to the Stanley Cup Finals -- And King Professor Edwards brought an honorary Doctorate, inscribed on real sheepskin, from Wayne State University.

This was the new man in charge, not the Governor, so they wanted to make sure he remembered who they were.

And so when the next day came, after they bedded down for the night and had breakfast -- they headed back to Detroit.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Lansing -- they took I-94 home instead, -- stopping off in Marshall for a quaint lunch at Win Schuler’s.

Yes, my friends, there is a little bit of truth in each bit of jest -- a little bit of authenticity in every ounce parody.

As this morning we welcome into our midst the Three Kings on their annual sojourn -- from Persia to Jerusalem to Bethlehem -- from Detroit to Lansing to Paw Paw --

And we do so with more than a sentimental and historical look back -- for the “Christ” they came to worship in Israel is the same Christ that you and I come to worship here this morning.

Their response to his birth was plain, unadulterated worship -- which involved a journey, a bowing of the knee and some very precious gifts.

Our response to Jesus’ birth calls forth the same thing.

We too come to worship -- which involves a journey, a bowing down and an offering of our most precious gifts.

You and I join the royalty -- for in Christ, we are royalty -- as we too bow down and worship.

This image St. Matthew presents to us this morning --for this story is only in St. Matthew -- is a very curious tale that more than a few scholars dismiss as a later addition -- intended as a literary vehicle to impress upon us that Jesus was God, if for no other reason, because of this fantastical birth.

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Other scholars tend to give this story the benefit of the doubt -- noting that there's nothing really too improbable about the story -- except for the moving star -- which, of course, could simply be a mis-labeling of a valid astrological occurrence.

And of course, in 66 C.E. we have evidence that a similar visit of Magi from the East was made to the Roman Emperor Nero-

And there's also this -- you and I also must pause to think why an early church, very much in conflict with astrology and Zoro-astrianism -- would seek to portray a band of Persian astrologers in such a positive light? (R.T. France)

So if we are to take this story seriously, we must begin by chipping off a bit of the calcified tradition that has obscured it -- to draw a little bit more closely to what the writer of Matthew may have intended.

First off, Matthew tells us that these three admirers were Magi -- not kings -- that royal moniker would develop in later traditions.

For to Matthew, these were Magi -- These were astrologers -- from Magi we get the word “magic.”

However, they were astrologers at a time when astrology and astronomy had not yet fully parted company-

Astrologers had not yet been confined to the early-AM shift on your cable provider -- they had not yet unionized to form the “Psychic Hotline.”

No, the Magi in our story still made headline news with their findings.

Astrophysicist Michael Molnar says the Magi were respected healers, diviners of dreams and astral experts.

They lived at a time when the Babylonian, Persian, and Egyptian understandings of star movements and meanings -- had coalesced under Greek influence into a standardized body of knowledge.-- this intricate system allowed the Magi to predict and chart the movements and mathematical relationships of the sun, moon and planets against the backdrop of fixed stars and constellations of the zodiac.

Although then, as is now, they could still never tell you when the Lions were going to win.

However, we note that these guys had centuries' worth of observations, correlations and charts.

In Molnar's view, one day, the Magi, charting the planets across the sky -- had an overwhelming omen of the birth of a great king.

In fact, Molnar consults astrological charts in April of the year 6 BCE, and he says a powerful astral alignment occurred --

All seven known planets were grouped together around Jupiter -- and they formed this profound image as interpreted by the ancient mind -- They saw a celestial royal family -- a gathering of planets -- that were playing the roles of attendants and spear-bearers for a portrait in the throne room.

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It was such an overwhelming sign that it sent the Magi packing -- packing up gifts to bring to whoever this great king might be.

During their journey, Jupiter made a noteworthy zigzag across the sky -- Molnar says it was, indeed, Jupiter that the astrologers followed -- up until it stopped in the position in which it began.....signaling to the Magi that they, too, should stop -- and look around -- for they had arrived. (Mary Barron)

But perhaps more important than the journey -- was what the Magi did when they arrived -- what it is that you and I do every time we arrive from the journey that brings us here, to St. David's.

Their journey took them through 1,200 miles of mostly desert -- Our journeys have probably taken us through deserts of our own -- perhaps experiences in other Christian communities -- perhaps life experiences of real doubt, uncertainty and tragedy.

But wherever we have come from, or through -- the miracle of Epiphany is that today we have arrived.

Jesus is revealed anew to us.

No, he is no longer in the manger -- but He is here nonetheless-

We meet Him in the Scriptures:

“And the Word was made Flesh”

We meet in the Sacrament::

“This is my body, this is my blood”

And we meet Our Lord in the community:

“Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there too.”

And as you and I come face-to-face with Jesus -- just as the Magi did -- We do the same thing they did -- We too bow down and worship.

In Middle English, the word ‘worship’ meant ‘dignity’ -- ‘honor’ or ‘reputation.’

Its root word is ‘worth.’ -- Worship is ‘worth-ship.’

So when we worship God we affirm God's worth -- and we fundamentally declare that “God is worthy” -- That's why we're here this morning -- God is worthy to be praised, to be sung about, to be preached about, to be confessed, and to serve. (Nathan Biersma)

We also come to consider that God isn't the only thing that is worthy in our lives --

We look at the other things that we worship -- we look at the other things we ascribe worth to -- possessions, experiences and relationships -- these are things that mean a lot to us --

And in the light of the true worth of God in our lives -- Epiphany asks us to consider what we are bowing down to today?

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In what ways is our own worship mis-directed?

Are we worshipping the way we really want to be worshipping?

How might we become better worshippers?

Worship, as our bulletin cover suggests, is all about presenting something to God -- we affirm worth by bringing worth.

So, if you would like, you are invited to close your eyes for a moment -- and imagine this scenario with me:

Imagine yourself coming to the altar.

We are walking forward, down the aisle, carrying a large, wooden bowl that we will set upon the altar.

And in that large wooden bowl are various gifts that we bring forward as our offering to God -- as a sign of worship to the only One who is deserving.

Inside the bowl are various gifts:

There's a gift of honesty -- it's in a blue canvas sack that we fill every time we refuse to tell a lie -- and remain faithful to the truth. -- What gifts of honesty can we bring?

Also inside our wooden bowl is a gift of purity. -- It's in a red canvas sack that we fill every time we cast aside the temptation to cheapen ourselves and our world -- and commit to do those things that redeem the world.

Also inside the bowl, there's a gift of integrity. -- It's in a green canvas sack -- and it is filled with those times when we avoided the shortcuts and did the right thing - - even when it was a hassle and may have harmed us.

But perhaps the most valuable thing inside this big wooden bowl is a little fabric doll that looks just like us. -- It's got our eyes, our nose and our lips -- and it's the most important thing we can offer.

But, let's look more closely at that doll -- Does that doll really look like us, or does that doll look like we wished we looked? --

In other words, is what we think we are offering to God any different than what we are really offering to God? -- How can we be more authentic? -- How can we be more honest with God and with ourselves?

We all know that the Lord accepts whatever we bring in the bowl -- with wide-open arms, a smile and soft words of assurance --

But what Epiphany asks of us is to assess our worship -- what is it we are bringing to the altar? -- and we ponder this question:

Is this what we want to give?

One of the most profound aspects of our Gospel story has to do with the response to the birth of Jesus by all the persons in power who were involved.

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Herod, the epitome of worldly power, was nothing short of terrified when he heard about Jesus’ birth -- He plotted and connived -- He acted like any scared and threatened person would -- lashing out, eventually ordering whole neighborhoods of babies to be slaughtered to appease his paranoia.

Meanwhile, look at this humble, pastoral picture of the Magi -- They couldn’t have reacted more differently. -- They came in humility and simply bowed down... before a child.

They were not uncomfortable with the possibility that their power would be shared, if not usurped. -- They were not uncomfortable with that fundamental human conviction -- that foundational assumption that is the bedrock upon which all healthy living is constructed: -- this statement:

“There is a God and I am not him (or her).”

Our Epiphany worship asks each one of us to affirm this fundamental notion.

We all know, God is the great one -- and we are only “great’ because of what God has done to us and through us -- which is our Christmas joy-

So come, let us too bring forward our most precious gifts to the One who gave them to us in the first place.

Amen.

Lessons:

Isaiah 60:1-6,
Ephesians 3:1-12,
Psalm 72:1-7,
Matthew 2:1-12