



Have You Ever Felt the Need to Be a Magi?

TEXT
Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is a wonderful story, but what you might love about this story may not come from Matthew. Because when it comes to details, Matthew is rather skimpy.¹

Carol and I spent part of New Year's putting our Christmas decorations back in the basement. That includes several nativities that we bring out each year. One is where the figures are all children. Jesus rests quietly in a little red wagon. The shepherds are all wearing tennis shoes. The magi have purple towels draped over their shoulders and are clad in Burger King-type crowns. It is the elementary school pageant. It's one of my favorites. Of course, it's not how Matthew tells the story, but I think Matthew would have loved it.

Another telling of Epiphany that I love is Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. Do you know it?

In *Amahl*, the magi follow the star and discover that they need evening rest. They come to the dwelling of an impoverished mother and her son, Amahl, who is unable to walk. Little Amahl — not known for telling the truth — tries to convince his mother that there are kings at the door. She doesn't believe him until

she comes to the door herself. As the kings stay the night, they tell of the child-king to whom they carry their gifts. "Would that I could send a gift of my own," she says, "but I am so poor."

Amahl, the crippled boy, says, "I will give him my crutch, who knows he may need one." Amahl steps forward to give his crutch to the kings. He walks. "Look, Mother, I can dance, I can jump, I can run." It's a sweet story. It is one of my favorite tellings of the visit of the magi.

Of course it comes merely from creative speculation. Matthew tells us nothing about the magi staying with a boy named Amahl. As a matter of fact, we don't know where they stayed, these mysterious travelers. Menotti just adds this to the story.

And adding to the story makes sense actually, because what this speaks to is the desire in us to be part of the life of this child — to bring him what we have to bring, even if it is a crutch, or to play a drum.

Adding to the story is what T.S. Eliot does. In my e-note on Friday, I shared with you Eliot's poem.

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the
year for a journey,*

*and such a long journey: ...
Then the camel men cursing
and grumbling
And running away, and want-
ing 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 singing in our
ears, saying
That this was all folly.²*

To know the emotions of the magi, well, that is far beyond anything that Matthew would tell us. But I love Eliot because, if I understand his text, he is saying it's not easy to find Christ in this world. It's not as easy as it sounds. You know what he's talking about.

I love the play *Cotton Patch Gospel*. The setting places the ministry of Jesus in South Georgia. That seems logical enough. Of course, being in South Georgia, the gifts of the magi are fragrant candles that give off the scent of fresh peaches, a large expensive looking bottle of Jade East and a Gold American Express card.³

Matthew does mention that these magi brought gifts — but not a credit card. What is this about? Here's what has happened. Over the years, the church has taken this story, and we have filled in some details. It started when we began to refer to the magi as kings.

Tertullian, churchman of the second century, said, "The magi are little less than kings to us."⁴ Now that's OK, except that's not actually what the magi were. According to New Testament scholar Eugene Boring (isn't that an unfortunate name?), magi "designates a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, such as astrology."⁵ They were astrologers? That's what one scholar has written. After all, they followed the star. But there is still some uncertainty of who exactly these magi were. It's something of a mysterious category, almost as if Matthew didn't want us to know exactly who these visitors were.

There's another crèche in our living room. It's pottery from South America. There are no shepherds at all, but the magi are there, complete with their crowns. I can be grateful to Tertullian for that detail. And of course you know how many there are: three, right? They almost always have three kings. *We three kings* ... of course we have learned that they weren't really kings, and not necessarily three.

In the Roman catacombs, you can find artwork of the magi. Some drawings have two, others four magi; there was one medieval list that listed 12 magi.⁶

But most have decided that there were three. There were three gifts — gold, frankincense and myrrh — so maybe three kings. It's as good a guess as any. I think this Child would have welcomed as many as would want to come.

We've had to fill in a lot of details for this story. One of the details we had to fill in is the fact that one of the magi was dark-skinned. Of course, Matthew doesn't tell us that, but everybody knows that one of the magi was black. But it makes sense. The magi could be and should be anyone.

While we are at it, his name was Balthazar. It is attributed to the Venerable Bede, historian of Charlemagne's time. He said that the first magi was Melchior, an old man with white hair and a long beard. The second, Gaspar by name, was young and beardless, and ruddy-complexioned. The third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, was named Balthasar.⁷

Now we have journeyed far beyond the teaching of the scripture, but it actually makes sense. After all, the magi, well the clearest thing we know of them is that they weren't Jews. They were Gentiles, which is to say they could have been from any part of the human family, from any race. They could have come from as far east as Asia, or from Ethiopia, or maybe from Macon, Georgia, bringing an expensive looking bottle of Jade East.

The point is, there is a long tradition of the church writing our names into this story. We have found ways to tell this story so that it includes us.

Raymond Brown, noted New Testament scholar, has said, to imagine our names written in the text may be Matthew's intent.⁸

Let me illustrate with another story. A few pages over, we find that the grown-up Jesus is engaged in his ministry, and he calls a tax collector: "Come and follow me." It was a remarkable thing to do, to call a tax collector to be a disciple — but it's what Jesus did.

The name of the tax collector was Levi. At least that's what Mark and Luke say. But when Matthew tells this story, he copies the story line by line from Mark, but he makes one change. He changes the tax collector's name. Do you know what name this tax collector goes by in Matthew's gospel? He changes Levi to Matthew.

Oh, you might say, "Well, Jesus called two tax collectors." Maybe, but I don't think so. You know what I think Matthew is doing? I think Matthew is writing his name in the story of God's work of love in the world. He knows that we all want to find our names written in the story of God's love in this world. We all want to be part of the story of Jesus' life in the world.

Because he knows that when we recognize what God has done in Christ, we want to know, "Can I be included?" We will want to play our drum for him; we will want to bring our crutch to him; we will want to give a large, expensive looking bottle of Jade East. We will want to be part of his life.

We will want to write our name in the story of God's love

in the world. Can I be included?
The answer is yes.

Today we are ordaining officers. They will answer a lot of promises. They will say yes; again and again, they will say yes. To boil all of those promises down, they are saying yes, they want to serve Jesus Christ by serving you. They want to be part of the story of God's love in the world.

But the truest sense of what is happening here is that God is saying yes to us all. We can all be part of God's work of redemption in the world.

My point today is really simple: In Jesus Christ, here is a holy love that claims you by name. It has come "unmasked, unforced, unearned"⁹

So bring what you have, bring who you are, but know when you come to this Christ, as our Village Voices sang Christmas Eve, "you will find room and welcome there for you."

Can you be included? Yes.

¹Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion* (1997), p. 16

²T.S. Elliot, *Journey of the Magi, The Complete Poems and Plays* (1950), p. 68

³Tom Key, *Cotton Patch Gospel*

⁴Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977), p. 197

⁵Eugene Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible VIII: Matthew* (1995)

⁶Brown, p. 198

⁷Ibid., p. 199

⁸Ibid.

9 From the hymn "Where Shepherds Lately Knelt"

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.