**Talking with Strangers**

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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It has been said that if the Baby Jesus had been visited by three Wise Women, they would’ve brought *practical* gifts: diapers, baby food, a crib. What does a baby have to do with gold, frankincense and myrrh?

Well, it turns out that *this* Baby has *plenty* to do with these seemingly peculiar gifts. And I’ll have more to say about that in a moment. But first we need some background for this story. And then we need to dig beneath the story. Because, as with *all* stories in scripture, there’s more going on here than meets the eye.

As you probably know, I take the Bible seriously, not literally. One *must* take this book seriously, because it is through these words that we hear the Word of God. The Word is revealed through story, legend, metaphor and history. So, yes, many of the stories in the Bible have some kind of historical underpinning. And this is true of the story of the Wise Men.

First of all, there really was a star, of sorts. In 7 B.C. Jupiter and Saturn were positioned in such a way that from earth they might’ve appeared to be one very bright star. And when you take into account miscalculations that have been made over the centuries regarding the year of Jesus’ birth, this may have been the time that he was born. King Herod, after all, died in 4 B.C., so we know that Jesus must’ve been born before that.

Secondly, Jupiter and Saturn were understood to be associated with royalty and with Israel. So it’s conceivable that astrologers in Babylon, for example, might have taken note of such a celestial event and concluded that a King had been born to the Jews.

And, thirdly, that’s what the Wise Men probably were: astrologers. The idea that there were kings came centuries after Matthew’s gospel was written. The word in the Bible is Magi, which refers to a group of Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Astrology was one of the tools of such priests. Persia was to the east of Judea. Hence wise men – or astrologers – coming from the East.

So, it’s conceivable that a group of astrologer-priests, learned men of the Zoroastrian faith in Babylon, noticed the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC, concluded that something of royal significance had happened among the Jews, and journeyed west to Judea to check it out. In short, there is *some* historical basis for this story.

But ask any storyteller. He’ll tell you that he never met a good story that didn’t become a better story through embellishment. And there are some master story tellers among the Bible’s authors. That’s one reason why you can’t take these stories literally. Even the stories of Jesus were passed on by word of mouth for several decades before anyone wrote them down: one story teller sharing these stories with another story teller. Lots of room for embellishment there. Thus we find in the journey of the Magi some details that make for a wonderful story but push the outside of the envelope of historical credibility. A star that travels northwest up the Euphrates Valley, takes a hard left at the Mediterranean, and then comes to a screeching halt at Bethlehem seems like a bit of a stretch.

But that’s missing the point. We’re dealing here not with history, but with revelation. There may be some history *behind* the story, but we have to dig *beneath* the story to get to the *heart* of the matter. And this is the heart of the matter: what is God trying to reveal to us *through* the story, with all of the marvelous embellishment that makes it such a great saga? As a New Testament scholar, the late Marcus Borg, put it, “We can debate about whether or not the story really happened; the key question is, what does the story really *mean*?”

And now we get to the issue of how appropriate those gifts really were: they symbolize who Jesus was.

Gold: a gift fit for a king. And Jesus was, and is, the King of kings.

Frank-incense: a gift that one priest might present to another. Throughout history, incense has been burned as an offering to the gods; something that a priest might do appease an angry god or bring joy to a friendly one and thus bring reconciliation between the divine and the human. A priest burns incense as an offering, and Jesus was the Great High Priest, offering *himself*,that God and humanity might be reconciled.

Myrrh: an ointment used to prepare a body for burial. For example, the body of a prophet. Prophets don’t live very long. Jesus will accuse Jerusalem of “killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you” (Mt. 23:37). Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King were prophets who were killed in our own time. Prophets tend to die violent deaths, and Jesus was a Prophet.

The gifts of the Magi aren’t literal gifts given to a baby. They are a key element of a story that reveals Jesus to us as Prophet, Priest and King. That’s what the story means.

But it’s not just about the gifts. It’s also about the Magi themselves. They’re not Jews. They’re Gentiles. Thus they reveal that this One born King of the Jews is a gift to the Gentiles as well. He is the Savior of the *world*. And by the end of the Matthew’s story, his followers will be sent out to “make disciples of *all* nations” (Mt. 28:19). That’s what the story means.

But the Magi aren’t just Gentiles; they’re *foreigners*. They’ve come from another country. And yet, they’re not feared. They’re not sent away. They are welcomed by Mary into her home. They are honored as guests; and what they have to offer is received with respect. Jesus’ mother lives out the Jewish custom of offering hospitality to strangers. And the implication is that Jesus’ followers are to do likewise. That’s what the story means.

Jesus Christ is Prophet, Priest and King. He is God’s Gift of salvation to the whole world. And even strangers are welcomed when they come to worship Him.

Did your mother ever tell you, “Don’t talk to strangers?” In certain situations, that is of course prudent advice to give a child. But I wonder if sometimes, as adults, we take that advice too far. I wonder if, when our mothers gave us that good advice, they did it in such a way that they instilled some fear in us that didn’t have to be there. Or maybe it’s fear that we needed as kids but we don’t need anymore. Because sometimes God sends strangers to us as messengers. And sometimes God sends strangers to us as friends; or people who will soon become friends. And when we’re willing to speak to strangers, and when we’re willing to look into the faces of strangers, we might see – in the sparkle of their eyes, in the smile on their lips – something of the face of Jesus. That’s what the story means.

Strangers come in many shapes and sizes. Some of them are quite small. And though they come to us as strangers, they quickly become objects of our affection, and cherished members of our family and community. We have one such former stranger with us this morning. But he is certainly a stranger no more. He came into the world in October, we first met him in November, some of us have already had the wonderful opportunity to cradle him, and on Christmas Eve he actually was the face of Jesus. We’re going to dedicate the newest member of our community of faith this morning. As we prepare to do so, we’re going to sing “*I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry*.”