

“The People Guided by the Spirit”

January 3, 2021
Online Worship Service
York United Ministries
Recorded at King City United Church
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Prayer for Illumination

Let us pray: O God, nations shall come to your light and rulers to the brightness of your dawn. By the compelling radiance of your Spirit, draw us near, reveal your truth, speak to us with your voice, and teach us faithful obedience to your holy Word.
Amen.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 2:1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

Happy New Year! We celebrated the coming of Baby Jesus last week. And we are still in the Christmastide. In the season, and we often send cards to our family and friends. I have received some Christmas cards that depict the scene of the first Christmas: A Christmas tree with shiny ornaments, mother Mary kissing baby Jesus, the shepherds visiting the baby who is lying in a manger. We are also familiar with the picture of the three noble men bringing three presents and worship him. We've heard the story of the first Christmas many times, so we think we know the birth story of baby Jesus very well. But there are some complicated aspects in it. First of all, who are the Magi in the passage? How many people visited baby Jesus? Three? How do you know? There is no description in the Bible that says the number of the wise men is three. Tell me if you can find where it says three people.

A related question: who are the people that visited baby Jesus? The Bible passage today says "the wise men" in the East. Or, in other versions, it says magi. The word Magi being used is now an English word, however, it originates from the Latin word of magus, and magi is the plural form of magus. The Greek Bible explains them "μάγοι ἀπὸ ἀνατολῶν"; that is the plural form of magus from the East.

Because reliable documents use it as plural form, we know that the people who visited Jesus are at least two people. But we naively assume that "the three people" gave three presents – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – to baby Jesus. One present per person, so they must be three people. Actually the Bible doesn't say they gave a present per a person.

Biblical scholars have searched other sources of the birth story of baby Jesus and found the answer in Armenian Christian tradition. According to Armenian Christian documents, it tells us that the people who visited baby Jesus were Baltsar, a Babylon scholar, Melchior, a Persian scholar, and Gasper, an Indian scholar. Another ancient document from Alexandria around 500 A.D. says that they are kings of Arabia, Persia, and India.¹

Now we can reasonably say that the number of wise men from the East is three, and although their occupation is controversial, they are very prestigious people. And the three are quite different from the shepherds living in the field, who witnessed the birth of baby Jesus in the manger and saw the angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹ <https://allinnet.info/antiquities/the-armenian-tradition-about-the-biblical-magi>; “The Armenian Tradition About the Biblical Magi”; accessed Dec.30, 2020. Also see <https://msu.edu/~williss2/carpentier/part1/balthasar.html>; Michigan State University; accessed Dec.30, 2020.

Let me explain the two visitations story with this chart.

	Social class	Travel Speed	Procedure	Place to visit	When	Note
Shepherds (Luke 2)	Working class	They went with haste and found the baby.	Came to the place directly	A manger	On the day of delivery.	They saw the angels sing
Magi (Matthew 2)	Scholar, magician, Astrologers, King	They observed the star and prepared to worship.	Visited King Herod first and then found baby Jesus	A house	The night before the escape to Egypt (2 yrs.) because of Herod's command for the massacre of babies under 2 years.	They gave three presents.

We can definitely tell that the magi were of high status to meet King Herod directly, and they were likely non-Jews. Baby Jesus was worshiped by shepherds who were in working class and non-Jews, gentiles. I won't elaborate on this, but isn't it interesting? The first worshippers of baby Jesus were the shepherds and the noble gentiles. Aside from the worship of baby Jesus, today's passage and the related stories in Matthew chapter 2 is led by four outstanding dreams: 1. The three wise men's dream, 2. Joseph's dream about fleeing to Egypt and 3. Joseph's dream about going back to Israel, 4. Joseph's dream about going to a small town, Nazareth.

1. First dream: The Three wise men's dream. As I said, the magi went to King Herod, and they explained why they came to Herod's country. They said they observed and followed the strange star, being convinced that that

must've been the sign of a new king. King Herod felt offended, because he was informed of a new born king while he was ruling the country. He was quite upset but, hiding his anger, he secretly asked them to release the information of the new king when they meet the baby. In the ancient world, especially the periods of monarchy, the King's words are law. And sometimes if a man satisfies the King, they would get good rewards. The magi were asked to release information on the new king, and they met baby Jesus. After worshiping baby Jesus and giving the three prepared presents, they spent a night. Their bed time, however, were not comfortable because one thing they had to decide whether they were going back to King Herod or not. When they slept over this, they dreamed a strange dream. It was not a foolish dream, but a divine one: An angel came up to them individually and gave them a warning not to return to King Herod. They woke up and found they dreamed the same dream and concluded that the dream was divine, so they left for their own country by another road.

2. Second dream: Joseph, a social father of Jesus, also dreamed after the three wise men left. An angel, we do not know if it was the same angel, but an angel came to Joseph and said in a dream, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." In the middle of the night, he woke up and reflected on what he had dreamed. Shortly after, he woke Mary, his wife and baby Jesus and talked about the dream. It must not have been easy for Joseph to convince his wife in the middle of the night right after he woke up that they had to leave right now. If you were Mary, would you believe that? "Honey, we must flee to California right now!"

I might talk back with a complaining voice “What...? What are you talking about? Are you OK? Let me sleep!” But at that moment, Mary trusted Joseph. They trusted each other. So they packed up their luggage and left Bethlehem in the middle of the night to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod.

3. Third dream: After a period of time in Egypt, Joseph was told to go back to Israel with his family. “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.” But he was afraid of being killed by the new king, Archelaus. He was a son of Herod who tried to kill baby Jesus, and the son Archelaus succeeded his father. Captured by the life-threatening fear, Joseph hesitated to go back to Israel.

4. Now the fourth dream Joseph dreamed again. It was about the direction that he and his family would take; going to settle in the district of Galilee. Galilee was such a small town that nobody paid attention to and no one could search for. Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus safely stayed there until Jesus’ time for the world.

Throughout the story of the four divine dreams, what do you feel about it? We often dream and most of them are useless or meaningless. But the people who dreamed their divine dreams were directed by the dreams, and God uses dreams in order to lead them to God’s plan. You know that I am not talking about the Freudian interpretation of dreams. It’s about the dreams that God intentionally provides us as divine Providence. These dreams were mysteries that cannot be explained. Who can explain

these dreams with human knowledge? Sigmund Freud, psychologists, psychiatrists or researchers of brain science? Valuing modern scientists' efforts, I'd always like to emphasize the divine realm in our faith. And the Bible passage for today dramatically shows how God works in mysterious ways: The Magi, Joseph, and Mary dreamed the divine dreams and followed to fulfill God's plan. And when they followed, when they listened to, and when they were obedient to God's plan for them, they were able to save their lives, find the way to live and fulfill God's good intention.

One thing I personally am really curious about from the Bible is this: how did they recognize that their dreams were of God? To recognize divine direction has been a critical theme in Christianity. We humans are not pre-programmed robots but an independent being with self-consciousness, and our God gives us opportunities to choose, decide, and act. In Christian theology, the process of experiencing, decision-making, and reflecting is called spiritual discernment. Sooner or later I hope I can get a chance to tell you about spiritual discernment, but today I'd like to give a quick response to my curiosity: again, how did they recognize that their dreams were of God? God was in the centre of their hearts: they woke up with, lived with, and slept over the Word of God. Some of us may share some important life-changing decisions or pivotal points of our lives that God must've interceded in. The intercessions in general could be both a shaking, dramatic experience and a calm, sturdy, consistent procedure. The discernments in the passage were urgent ones; when they dreamed the divine dream they experienced the convincing, unspeakable divinity. And they instantly recognized the divine intercession upon them and they were in the middle of God's plan.

Brothers and sisters! Like God as plan for the magi, God has plans for you, too. The procedure of the plan could be dramatic and dynamic. Can you see or recognize God's dynamic plan towards you? Here I brought your resolutions that you handed in to me last January. I believe God has been working and struggling with you for your plans, goals and devotions. And I believe you are still in the middle of the divine plan and your discernment. While struggling and working on them, let's be confident that God is leading every one of you, showing the light of truth, revealing God's Providence towards you this year. Nobody can deny that our last year was an unexpectedly memorable year and we muddled through it. And we give thanks to God who has led us this far.

Now I gently invite you to reflect again on your 2020 and ponder on your new year of 2021. Let's give our hearts and devote ourselves to God. Our God guided Joseph, Mary, and the Magi in the passage: Let's ask God who guided Joseph, Mary, and the Magi to guide us in our every step. Divine guidance has been activated because we are walking with and praying to God, trusting God's sincerity. Let us pray silently.