

The Journey of Epiphany

The story of the Magi and their quest for the Christ child is legendary. Magi were Magians, members of the priestly caste. The religion of the Magi was fundamentally that of Zoroaster, their astrology and skill in interpreting dreams helped them find Christ. The Magi came from the East most likely from Persia, to Jerusalem a journey of between 1000 and 1200 miles. Such a distance may have taken between three to twelve months by camel.

What drew them to this journey?...a theory, a hope, a mysterious appearance in the sky that pointed them to that hope? What had they hoped to find? The scholars with a theory to prove...risked the comfort of their home and familiar surroundings to venture forth into unknown territory to find what they thought was true. Consulting and putting their minds together they gathered their ideas, their experiences, their tools to find their way, clothes (only what was needed), food, water, something to trade for goods, their gold frankincense and myrrh. These spices were hard to come by in other countries. The camels were saddled, the packs loaded onto their backs. Their long lashed eyes somber as they knelt for the magi to mount. Then

they lurched as they rose to their feet with the rustle of packs, jingle of bells on the reins. And they groaned the way only camels can groan.

People gathered to wish them well. People who couldn't travel themselves but sent them ahead with prayers and support for the journey.

What was that trip like? Camel strides covering desert ground, cool nights around the campfire, continuing conversations, getting to know their companions in a deeper way through the intimacy of living together, surviving together in a strange land. What sights did they see? What foods did they taste? What trouble befell them? Did they huddle together behind the tough hides of their camels during a dust storm? Did they find kidlike delight in a waterhole on a particularly dusty hot day and take a dip? What stories were they gathering that would be told over and over again?

At some point the magi had consulted scripture. They recited the Isaiah passage as to where the King of the Jews would be born...Jerusalem. They must have heard from fellow travelers that Herod was descended from the Idumaeans and was referred to as a Jew by birth. The Idumæans were brought under subjection towards the end of

the second century B.C., and obliged to live as Jews, so they were technically considered Jews. They must have discovered from discussions that Herod's allegiance, however, was to himself and his ambitions. His father had helped the Romans in the Orient so Herod came by his power and influence through his lineage, his cunning, and his ruthlessness. He married Marriane, a Hasmonion, a people popular among the Jews. But he later had her executed along with many other members of his family including his own sons. During his 37 years of reign he was a noted tyrant and murderer. He was known as the evil genius who brought prosperity to Jerusalem and yet his means were gruesome. He put to death anyone who was in his way.

In Jerusalem the magi find the famous King Herod. Because of their status the magi must have known that Herod would welcome them into his court. The grounds were stately, manicured, and immaculate. The servants kept their eyes lowered. Herod meant to impress these rich foreigners. What meals did they consume in the presence of Herod? What did they observe? Was Herod on good behavior to impress his guests? Was Herod visibly struck when he learned their quest was for "The King of the Jews?" and it wasn't him? Herod consults with his scribes and

priests to see if what the wise men said was true. They looked up scripture and found in Micah that the baby is said to be born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. And yet Herod's scribes and priests didn't go...why weren't they excited about the news? Was it just myth, symbolism to them? Nor did they keep the information from the wise men. I suppose if Herod is truly paranoid he could be afraid of offending these rich foreigners. Why stir up more trouble for his country. No, he would send them on their way and follow up afterwards. This would give Herod some time to plan and scheme about what to do next. No Messiah would interrupt his plans. God would just have to wait!

Why would followers of Zoroaster be interested in a Jewish King? Zoroastrian theology believed that God, Ahura Mazda, will ultimately prevail. The universe will undergo a cosmic renovation and time will end. In the final renovation, all of creation — even the souls of the dead that were initially banished to "darkness" — will be reunited in Ahura Mazda. At the end of time a savior-figure [a Saoshyant] will bring about a final renovation of the world, and in which the dead will be revived. All humanity will speak a single language and belong to a single nation without

borders. All will experience immortality (Ameretat) and will share a single purpose and goal, joining with the divine for a perpetual exaltation of God's glory.

They were seekers...seekers of God...of truth...of meaning...and of a king of peace and prosperity . They were true scholars who tested out their theories. They were people who yearned to experience their discoveries with their lives not just their minds.

What had they hoped to find?...the savior figure? What had it looked like in their mind? Were they surprised to find their long journey took them to the home of a poor peasant family. There was no great reception, long tables of food to exchange conversations with dignities. No hope of establishing good relations for future political alignments. No, there was a baby with his mother and father. And yet these scholarly, rich, long suffering travelers, followers of Zoroaster, were awed and amazed and bowed to worship him. There was no one to impress ...but God.

True to Magi form...their wisdom prevailed. The dream told them the truth of Herod...if they had not discerned that in meeting him. They did not reveal

the location of the baby boy Jesus. In fact they went out of their way to go home undetected.

What was the return trip like? How did their conversations change? They had given all they had to the savior figure, gold frankincense and myrrh. Their packs were lighter. They discovered they could travel faster and the camel's strides lengthened as they glided over the terrain on their way home. It felt like flying for they were flying in their minds, their findings confirmed that God however one described God, prevailed. The savior was born.

It took strangers from another religious faith, another country to reveal it to the people in charge. The savior was there right under their nose. That shouldn't surprise us after living through 2008. This story points out a realistic truth. The ones in power are often clueless to what is most important.

This is the time of year...when we gather our information to prepare our taxes. Close out the books. Look at our investments and wonder when the stock markets will rebound. It's time to realize that the securities that we pile around us are not so secure. We take inventory not only of our net worth

but our spiritual life. Where have we fallen short?
What is lacking to make life balanced and whole?

This is the time of year when we hear the reviews of 2008 both humorous and frightening. We can see in the story that even evil Herod with his power and prestige could not control the birth of a baby or his influence on the world. WE can admit that we are powerless and believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to some sort of sanity. This is the time of year to count our blessings. Recall the God moments in our lives.

We like the magi , can look for the wisdom of God in our lives. We can lean on guidance. We can take the spiritual journey of relying on God, risking familiarity and security to find God in our everyday lives... in each footfall, each glance at the map or the stars. We can hear our Herod selves insist that our identity is in the power and prestige, accomplishments. The Herod self that says spirituality is fantasy and foolishness. Turning from that ugly sight in the mirror we can pursue the corrected path. Just as the Magi didn't dismiss Herod's direction to Bethlehem we can listen, to crazy rantings which can still lead us in the right direction. Just as in the story

even wise ones have to seek another's opinion. Even the wise ones make a mistake.

And though we might not agree with everything said we can learn from other religions, cultures, ways of thinking.

WE can take the journey to the unlikely revelation of God. WE can be embarrassed at the meager surroundings of our God. We can witness once again how it is not the surroundings that makes a king...it is not the prestige.. it is the heart..the purity.

The story tells us that God is alive and well!

That the Herods of the world do not have the final say!

The story tells us...don't stop here! The story must go on. The nativity is lovely but the story must continue. We must return home.

We **can** return home.

We are changed for having gone on the journey. And now ...we can be guides for others who seek.

The magi return to the cries of a welcome home party. "They have returned! They are here!" the sound echoes throughout the town square. The thump thump of the camel feet beat a cadence on the road.

White smiles in worn grimy faces give the first hint that their journey was successful. The crowd gathers as the riders approach and they swarm them as they dismount. "Good News, Good News!" the magi shout to the waiting crowd..."A Savior is born, God is alive and well!"

And so the stories begin....