



A new path
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Year C, Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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In 1998 I spent most of the year living in Saudi Arabia. It so happened that I was there during the time of Hajj. The Hajj is arguably the largest religious pilgrimage in the world given that tens of thousands of people complete it every year. It is an obligation of all Muslim people to participate in the Hajj at some point during their life. To do so they must travel, often from great distances, to the city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, in order to walk in the footsteps of the prophet Muhammad and of Abraham.

As I am not a Muslim, I could not participate in this religious journey, despite a very genuine desire to appreciate just what this experience is like for our Muslim brothers and sisters. What really sparked my interest, was seeing pilgrims dressed in two white pieces of linen, as they journeyed in quite extraordinary ways through the Saudi desert towards Mecca. Some walked. Some travelled by bus or car. And yes, I even saw a number of pilgrims travelling on the backs of camels.

While Hajj might be the largest annual pilgrimage in the world, it is only one expression of the much greater phenomenon which is pilgrimage. Over the centuries countless people have responded to a feeling deep within them, to seek new places and experiences, and more significantly, to connect their life story with a story greater than their own. Every year thousands of people of different faiths, as well as those of no faith, walk the Camino, the pilgrimage route across northern Spain. Others travel to different places of cultural or spiritual significance. Many more simply travel, without a specific destination in mind, but rather are simply drawn towards the possibility of discovery.

At the core of this phenomenon lies a truth, as humans we recognize that with new experiences come with the opportunity for growth and transformation. Physically traveling to a new place is one way that we can proactively seek out such transformational experiences.

As a child I found the story of the Magi to be mysterious and enchanting. I call these people Magi, because that is how the bible names them. These are not three kings or three wise men. The bible does not tell us that there were only three people, it does not tell us they were men or kings, and the word wise is nowhere to be found. The word Magi suggests that there was a group of people, there might have been men and women travelling together, which was common in the ancient world, but ultimately the bible gives us no real detail on who these people were, how many there were, or where they came from.

Later traditions of the church did what church tradition often does, it got creative with the lack of information about these people. Tradition loves filling in the blanks. The number of three people was arrived at to match the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although, I note that when I lived in the middle east the nativity sets there only ever had figures for two magi, not three. When I asked someone why this was, they simply told me, "People in the west always get that wrong. There were only two gifts. Frankincense and myrrh are given together."

For better or worse, in the west the idea of three men with three gifts persists. More than that, these three imagined characters were given names. Balthazar, Melchior and Casper. Again, these names do not come to us from the Bible, but are part of later church tradition. The name Balthazar means something like, protector of the King. Melchior may come from a Jewish phrase meaning, My King is Light. And Casper means treasurer, or in the case of the wise men of tradition, Casper is the one who carries the gold. In this way tradition has attempted to say more

about the child born at Christmas, a child who needed protection, was a sign of light and hope, a child worthy of the most valuable things we could offer. These are not bad additions to the Christmas story, I just wish they hadn't pushed unnamed women out of the narrative completely.

But enough about what the bible didn't say. What did our reading this morning actually tell us about these Magi, and why is their story so crucial to the Christmas narrative? Here I will draw upon the thoughts of Professor Jione Havea.

We are told that the Magi arrive in Jerusalem looking for a king. They have seen this king's star in the sky and wish to locate him. Herod the Great learns of their search and summons them to him. Herod the Great is so named largely because of the huge number of construction projects he undertook throughout Palestine. He completed the second temple in Jerusalem, a building that was one of the great architectural wonders of the ancient world. Herod also built many Roman buildings, including amphitheatres, circus maximus for chariot racing, a colosseum, palaces, as well as temples to Caesar and other pagan Gods. While Herod was a Jewish King, he was also subject to the emperor of Rome, and was aligned with the power of the empire in many ways. This was the man the Magi met. A man who was synonymous with imperial power.

Herod is far from excited by the appearance of the Magi. Rather, we are told, Herod was afraid. For all his power and influence, Herod's response was one of insecurity. For Herod the news of a new king was taken as a personal threat. His mind quickly shifted to how he can maintain his power and affluence by eliminating this would-be successor. In asking the Magi to meet the Magi, Herod is simply drawing them into his own plot, a plot to discover where this new king has appeared so that Herod can dispose of him, thereby maintaining his position within the Roman empire. Herod's intentions are murderous in nature.

The Magi leave Herod and soon after find the child of promise. I wonder if like other pilgrims, that moment of arrival was all they thought it might be? Did they find what it was they were looking for? While not stated explicitly in the text, there is a suggestion that something significant did take place. That a moment of transformation occurred for the Magi.

It seems that when searching for the newborn Christ the Magi were quite comfortable meeting with Herod and all he represented in terms of imperial power. But something changed for the Magi after they left Herod and found the child. We are told that upon finding Christ they were filled with joy, but rather than sending word back to Herod as he had requested, they made a different choice. They chose to ignore Herod's request and rather than return to him, they travelled home by a different road. The suggestion of this story is that having encountered Christ, the Magi can no longer be complicit in the rules of empire. They cannot participate in a system of oppression, where children are put in harms way.

We still live in a world which all too often turns a blind eye to the suffering of children. Funding for food parcels, breakfasts in schools, and other such important interventions is being dramatically cut back as we begin 2025. Only 12 days ago, we remembered the birth of Christ, an event that promised a better world, a world of justice for all people, including children. For the Magi found meeting the newborn Christ was so transformative that they could no longer comply with unjust treatment of the vulnerable. The challenge for all of us, it to channel the joy of Christmas into meaningful action. Into decisions that challenge our world to support those who live in poverty, those who are exploited, and those who cry out for justice. Epiphany is a day for new beginnings. Will you continue to walk the same road, or will you, like the Magi, find the courage to strike out on a new path?