

The Other Wise Man
Matthew 2:1-12
Colebrook Congregational Church
January 10, 2016 / First Sunday after Epiphany

The traditional date for Epiphany is January 6th, twelve days after Christmas. That notation inspired the title of William Shakespeare's play, Twelfth Night; but also, I was surprised to learn, the song The 12 Days of Christmas is also a reference to it!

Epiphany, which means manifestation or theophany, is a divine revelation of God in the form of a human as Jesus, and the visit of the Magi, who represent the wider world, symbolically reveals Him to the World.

The Gospel of Matthew is the only one to tell the story of the Visit of the Magi. There are no parallels.

These Magi are literal references to the priestly astrologers of the Zoroastrian religion, from the general vicinity of Persia. They are unnamed and unnumbered, but since three gifts were brought, the assumption is that there were three of them.

Later traditions gave the three names and ethnicities and ages. They shifted over the centuries, with many countries in Asia claiming to be the home of one of them, settling on Melchior, Caspar, & Balthazar; and having them represent the continents of Europe, Asia, & Africa.

Their story is that through astrology, they determined that an important ruler was born among the Judeans, and they went to honor him. Their arrival did not happen immediately after Jesus' birth. The selection talks about how Mary is somewhere else, in an actual house, not a stable. It could have been anywhere up to two years, it is thought, because of King Herod's order to massacre those under age two.

When the Magi found Jesus, they gave Him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because of this, in some traditions, gifts are not given on Christmas, but on Epiphany, because of the Magi.

My first work-study job at Divinity School was in the Ministry Resource Center, and I was encouraged to watch and evaluate the video resources of that library. One day, I came across a movie called *The Fourth Wise Man*. It starred Martin Sheen & Alan Arkin, so I figured that I would give it a shot. Turns out that this movie was an adaptation of a short story by Henry van Dyke called *The Other Wise Man*, published in 1895.

It is the story of an additional Magi who was always just one step behind the others, because he became distracted from his quest, but he still made it in the end, delivering his gifts to Jesus, several years after the others.

I watched that film about 15 years ago, so I what I am about to relate to you is a combination of what I remember from that film and the original story it is based upon.

The Magi in Persia observed the Star of Bethlehem, and they discussed and argued amongst themselves about it meaning. Only four of them believed that it announced the birth of a new King among the Judeans strongly enough that they made arrangements to travel to find this new King and present him with gifts. They decided to go separately to put their affairs in order and then meet at a temple at the edge of the desert in order to travel together.

The youngest of the Magi, Artaban, sold all his possessions and bought three gems: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl. He then set out on his horse to the rally point. If he pushed himself and the horse, he could just make it in time to set off with his colleagues. However, an hour's journey short of his destination, in the dark of night, Artaban came across a man in the road, nearly dead. Artaban realized that he could not ignore this person in need, so he brought the man out of the road to a better place, and found food and water, spending many hours nursing the man back to health.

By the time he made it to the rally point, the others were long gone into the desert, leaving Artaban a note. Artaban realized that he cannot make the journey by himself with what he had. He must now backtrack to Babylon, sell his sapphire, and hire a caravan to take him across the desert safely.

When Artaban finally arrived in Bethlehem, he was obviously too late to meet his colleagues, but he discovered that the town was eerily quiet. He learned that the men were off hiding their flocks from Roman tax collectors. He was taken in by a woman with a small child, and fed dinner. He learned from her that his colleagues were there, but had mysteriously disappeared. She said they found Jesus and his mom, and shortly after the other Magi disappeared, they too left, for Egypt.

There was a horrible noise outside, and Artaban went to investigate, finding the soldiers sent by King Herod. He saw what they were doing. He stood in the doorway of the house and when the captain approached the door, he refused to move and then offered him the ruby to just move on. The ruby was taken and the captain ordered the soldiers to move on, saying that there was no child in that empty house.

Artaban then traveled to Egypt to continue his search for Jesus, finding himself always a step behind him, never seeing him, only hearing about him. The reason he was always a step behind was that he always stopped to help someone in need. An excerpt from the book:

“So I saw the Other Wise Man again and again, travelling from place to place, and searching among the people of the dispersion, with whom the little family from Bethlehem might, perhaps, have found a refuge. He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land, and the poor were crying for bread. He made his dwelling in plague-stricken cities where the sick were languishing in the bitter companionship of helpless misery. He visited the oppressed and the afflicted in the gloom of subterranean prisons, and the crowded wretchedness of slave-markets, and the weary toil of galley-ships. In all this populous and intricate world of anguish, though he found none to worship, he found many to help. He fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and healed the sick, and comforted the captive; and his years passed more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle that flashes back and forth through the loom while the web grows and the pattern is completed.”

Artaban, now an old man, over thirty years after he started out on his quest, decided to try searching Jerusalem during Passover. As he was entering the

city, he heard about a ruckus, and people were heading out to witness the crucifixion of Jesus. He despaired that he was too late, but decided that he would go too, and try to offer the pearl as Jesus' ransom.

However, on his way, he saw a woman about to be dragged off into slavery. She recognized his dress and symbols and called out to him as a fellow countrymen. It was his constant conflict. Twice now, his consecrated gifts have been drawn instead into the service of humanity. This was a third trial for Artaban. Was it temptation or opportunity? He decided that to save this woman would be a true act of love, and so he gave the pearl to save her.

Then, there was the earthquake that happened when Jesus died. Artaban and the woman huddled together by a wall.

Another excerpt:

“What had he to fear? What had he to hope? He had given away the last remnant of his tribute for the King. He had parted with the last hope of finding him. The quest was over, and it had failed. But, even in that thought, accepted and embraced, there was peace. It was not resignation. It was not submission. It was something more profound and searching. He knew that all was well, because he had done the best that he could from day to day. He had been true to the light that had been given to him. He had looked for more. And if he had not found it, if a failure was all that came out of his life, doubtless that was the best that was possible. He had not seen the revelation of "life everlasting, incorruptible and immortal." But he knew that even if he could live his earthly life over again, it could not be otherwise than it had been.”

And then, Artaban heard Jesus, thanking him for the gifts. Artaban then understood that all he had done, had been done for Jesus as well.

For me, this story that parallels the story of Jesus, standing next to, yet separate from the Three Magi, gave me mixed feelings. I admit that I had a bit of tunnel vision. Artaban had a mission and you can see how much it meant to him, and you wanted him to catch up to the Magi or to Jesus and present his gifts to Him! Every time he cashed in a jewel, I wanted to scream

at the television, “No! Don't do that! Find some other way to help! Save that for Jesus!”

But I was missing the point, wasn't I? By the end, I saw that what Artaban was doing was giving those gifts to Jesus through those he was helping! So now, this story reminds me that while it is good to venerate Jesus, I must also do so through serving others and seeing to their needs. For all of us, it is good to congregate together in fellowship and worship, to sing the songs, to say the prayers, to give the offerings, and to raise up the psalms; but we must never forget, never forget, that we also meet Jesus in everyone we meet, especially those who are need, and that what ever we give to others, like Artaban, we also offer them as gifts to Jesus.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[Pause]

God of revelation, as we gather in praise for the gracious mystery of your Son, we remember the many needs of your church and your world.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for giving us the strength to serve others. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. We thank you for the generous donations that will help us help our neighbors in need.

We know we are not perfect, so we pray for the forgiveness of our transgressions. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those who are held by troubles. We pray for the loosening of their burdens, & we pray for their caregivers. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to continue to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the families of the victims of violence. We pray for the refugees around the world, both home & abroad, for victims of natural disasters, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought & famine. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:
People of Manipur

Guide us on the path of salvation, O God, that the radiance and power of your Holy Spirit working in the world will gather together all peoples and nations in one community to offer you worship and proclaim your splendor. Amen.

Psalm 72:1-7, 11-14

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service. For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.

Matthew 2:1-12 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.