

## A Camel on the Roof

Matthew 2:1-12

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2010]

### I

Of all the characters of Christmas,  
the Wise Men are the most misunderstood.

We are easily confused about...

Who they were—  
were they kings, mystics, astrologers, magicians?—

How many there were—  
tradition says three, but Matthew never says—

And what they were doing—  
a divine summons or a spy mission for Herod?

We are also frequently confused about the time when they show up in the Christmas narrative...

thinking that they arrive about the same time as the birth of Jesus.

So we see them included on Christmas cards and in manger scenes and their offering of gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ Child becomes the justification for our own gift exchange frenzy.

By the time the Wise Men, or Magi, do show up on Epiphany, January 6, we are all pretty well burned out with Christmas,

December 25 seems so long ago anyway,  
and the NFL playoffs now command our full attention.

The Church has failed to properly observe Epiphany,  
and modern culture has replaced the ancient observance of the **Twelve Days of Christmas** with the **last twelve shopping days until Christmas**.

Perhaps one of the great miracles of our age is that Epiphany has yet to be discovered by the marketing experts and corporate executives as a way for them to clear their shelves of the left-over Christmas inventory.

## II

What we do know is that the Magi came from the east and that they were probably an ancient class of Zoroastrian priests.

Students of the stars and planets  
and learned in the lore of ancient beliefs in a long-awaited Messiah,  
they knew that the star they followed was  
a portent of great hope and promise.

Unlike the impoverished shepherds,  
who responded with open-mouthed wonder and joy at the angel's message  
and the tiny baby's presence,  
the Wise Men came prepared with some of the most extravagant gifts  
of their age.

And yet, despite their wealth, their knowledge, and their position,  
the Magi presented themselves humbly before the Christ Child.

They did not attempt to impress others with their wisdom or insights.

They came simply to worship and to serve.

They traveled a great distance—  
perhaps as much as 1200 miles—  
to the place where Jesus was  
and they did not demand anything in return.

They followed the star to Bethlehem  
and then, after being warned by an angel,  
returned by a different path.

The Magi were but simple witnesses to the miraculous event that had taken place.

Their Epiphany gift to us is the reminder that God's presence is to be found in the places we least expect.

## III

The question of Epiphany...

the question brought to us by these enigmatic Magi...  
is "Where does one look for God?"

An ancient Arabic story tells of a certain King Ebrahim ibn Adam of Balkh (now northern Afghanistan) who was wealthy according to every earthly measure.

At the same time he sincerely and restlessly strove to be spiritually wealthy.

One night the king was roused from sleep by a fearful stamping on the roof above his head.

Alarmed, he shouted, "Who's there?"

"A friend," came the reply from the roof. "I've lost my camel."

Perturbed by such stupidity, Ebrahim screamed,  
*"You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?"*

*"You fool!"* the voice from the roof answered.  
*"Are you looking for God in silk clothing and lying on a golden bed?"*

These simple words filled the king with such terror that he arose from his sleep and went on to become a remarkable man of faith and service to others.

This story raises a compelling question: **Where are you looking for God?**

It is an appropriate question for the beginning of a new year,  
just as the question, "Where have you found God?"  
is an appropriate way to close out a year.

The Magi's gift to us is the reminder that God is not to be found where the world's princes and powers reside.

God is found among the weak,  
the lowly,  
and the helpless.

God is found among those who are willing to forsake their power and pride and with humility seek after God.

Are we willing to be like the king's friend...

willing to make fools of ourselves asking *the camel on the roof* question to a world busy seeking God in all the wrong places?

Are we willing to be a light in the dark places,

willing to share the light of God's love and grace with our neighbors, friends, and family members?

#### IV

There is another Arabic story of "Seventeen Camels" that tells of a certain Mohammedan who died and left his seventeen camels to be divided among his three sons.

The oldest son was to receive one ninth of the camels.

The middle son was to get one half of the camels.

The youngest son was to get one third of the camels.

Seventeen camels, however, are not easily divided by three.

Hence the three sons argued long and loud about what to do.

In desperation they agreed to let a certain wise man decide for them.

He was seated in front of his tent with his own camel staked out back.

After hearing the case, the wise man took his own camel and added it to the other seventeen camels, making eighteen.

He then gave the oldest son one ninth, or two of the camels.

To the middle son he gave one half, or nine camels.

To the youngest son he gave one third, or six camels.

And guess what—he got his own camel back!

How many people try to find God and solve life's problems by logical, calculating schemes?

How many people are closed off to God's light because they are selfishly concerned about receiving their share?

The Magi teach us that God is to be found...

in receiving,  
     not grasping,  
 in giving,  
     not in claiming our rights,  
 in serving,  
     not in being served.

## V

As we enter this New Year, we must ask ourselves—

is the way to God to be found in climbing the ladders of success, power, and respectability?

It would appear that many in our world still think this way.

The pursuit of money and power is one of the most powerful religions in the history of humanity.

An example of this was found in the true story of a college English professor who assigned his entering freshmen students a 500-word paper on the theme,

“Why are you attending college?”

He encouraged the students to be candid and straight-forward.

The results were disturbing.

Paper after paper seemed to have been written by a machine—

college was a means to the end of success, status, prosperity, security.

Only two papers stood out as dramatically different in spirit and content from the others.

These papers talked about college enabling the writers to do something with their lives that would be good for the world,  
     that would improve the planet,  
     and that would serve others.

The professor was at first encouraged, because it only takes two to make a difference.

But then he became even more disillusioned when he realized that neither of the two students who authored these papers was born in the United States.

The two students who sought service over status, success, and security were from Angola and Lebanon.

## VI

Friends, the Epiphany news is that God is found in incarnation—  
     in the humility of a birth in a stable,  
     in the willingness freely to offer one's gifts,  
     in the willingness to serve without thought of reward or return.

The Epiphany message tells us that the vulnerability of a life of homelessness, suffering, and death on a cross is God's most powerful work in human life.

It is a message as startling as a camel on a roof.

But this message tells us that a light has come into our world—

    a light more brilliant than the pillar of cloud by day  
     or the pillar of fire by night;

    a light more powerful than sun, moon, and stars;

    an illumination from God that can raise the roof of the world's kings,  
     princes, presidents, and prime ministers.

*“Arise, shine, for your light has come.”*

As God's faithful servants, we are called to offer a ministry of light and a message of illumination that will transform the lives of those who encounter Christ.

An example of this transformation comes from Tom Long, now retired after a long career teaching homiletics at Princeton Theological Seminary and Candler School of Theology in Atlanta.

While teaching in Atlanta, Professor Long attended a Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta which, like many downtown churches, felt called to respond to the problem of homelessness.

So it was the practice of that church to open its gymnasium as a shelter during the winter months and to have people from the church serve as hosts for the guests who came in out of the cold each night.

Tom Long volunteered to be a host one night, and since no one else volunteered, he invited a friend to come and join him.

His friend was not a member of that church;  
in fact, he wasn't a member of any church.

But periodically, in their conversations about religious matters, this friend would say,

"Tom, I'm not a theologian, but it seems to me...,"  
and then he would express his opinion.

On this particular night as they were hosting the shelter, they met the men as they arrived, saw that they had something to eat, and hung out with them for a while.

Then as the men began to prepare to retire, Tom's friend said,  
"Tom, you get some sleep. I will stay with them the first watch, then I'll wake you up, and you can come and stay with them for the rest of the night."

So the friend stayed up and mingled with the guests, listened to them, asked questions about who they were, what had happened in their lives that they were now homeless.

At 2:00 a.m. he went in and woke up Tom. He said,

*"Wake up! Wake up! I want you to come and see this. Granted I am no theologian, but I think that Jesus is down there."*

Where will you encounter Jesus in this New Year?

Not from economics, regardless of Alexander Pope's 1738 maxim:

*Get place and wealth if  
possible with Grace;  
If not, by any means get  
wealth and place.*

Not from inside traders or hedge fund managers.

Not from education or the wisdom of the world.

Not from science and technology.

The Magi point us to were the world's best hope,  
the world's only salvation can be found—  
bowing before Christ who is found and served in  
(as St. Theresa described hell)  
“the places that stink and where no one loves.”

## VII

Do you remember Henry Van Dyke's story of “The Other Wise Man?”

Artaban planned to join his friends in searching for the new-born king.

He sold all his possessions and bought three great jewels—  
a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl.

These would be his gifts for the king.

But Artaban was late meeting his friends, because he stopped to help a sick,  
wounded man and took him to be cared for in the nearest town.

There he sold his first jewel—the sapphire—to hire a caravan to take the man  
across the desert safely.

When Artaban finally came to Bethlehem, he learned that the Wise Men from the  
east had indeed brought rich gifts to a child born in a stable, but they had left  
Bethlehem, as had the child and his parents.



It was in Bethlehem that Artaban gave his second jewel—the ruby—to save a woman and her son from the cruelty of Herod’s soldiers.

And then Artaban wandered for many years seeking the king, and yet he was always willing to stop and give aid to those who knew hunger, pain, or sorrow.

But always he kept safe the great pearl that he might one day offer it to the king.

At last the word came to him:

*“The Messiah you seek—the King—has gone to Jerusalem for the Passover. It is said the priests plan to kill him there.”*

As Artaban hurried to Jerusalem, hoping to use the great pearl to save the king, a young woman running from two soldiers threw herself at his feet crying:

“O sir, help me! They seek to make me a slave.”

Artaban took out the great pearl and put it in her hand.

“Here, my child,” he said, “This pearl will buy your freedom.”

As Artaban turned slowly away, there was darkness over the earth, and the ground shook. He moved close to the city wall for shelter, just as a loosened rock fell, hitting his head and shoulder.

Dazed, Artaban sank to the ground, no longer caring whether he lived or died.

But as his eyes closed, he seemed to hear a voice saying,

*“Artaban, I have received your gifts with great joy.”*

Artaban opened his eyes weakly:

“But Lord,” he said, “when saw I thee?”

The voice answered, *“Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my children, you have done it unto me.”*

At last, Artaban had found his king!

Amen.