

Home by Another Way

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Bloor Street United Church – New Year's Day – 1st after Christmas

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Sources: Isaiah 60: 1-6

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Psalm 72 (Voices United p. 790)

Give the ruler your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal heir

for judging your people rightly,
and upholding the poor with justice.
Hail to God's own anointed, who rules in equity.

May your anointed defend the cause of the poor among the people,
save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor.

May your anointed live as long as the sun endures,
as long as the moon from age to age.

May your anointed be like rain falling upon the grass,
like showers that water the earth,

may your anointed be one in whose days justice shall flourish
and peace abound till the moon is no more.

Hail to God's own anointed, who rules in equity.

May the rulers of Tarshish and the isles pay tribute,
the monarchs of Sheba and Seba bring gifts.

May all rulers do homage,
and all nations render service.

For your anointed shall deliver the needy when they cry,
the poor and those who have no helper.

Your anointed shall have pity on the weak and the needy,
and save the lives of the poor.

From oppression and violence your anointed shall redeem their life,
and count as precious their blood.

Hail to God's own anointed, who rules in equity.

Blessed are you, O God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous things.

Blessed is your glorious name for ever.

May the whole earth be filled with your glory.

Hail to God's own anointed, who rules in equity.

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.

I'm Melchior – a retired magus...that's singular for magi. I'm an old man now; but in my day I was a very busy astrologer. I read books, studied the heavens at night. I spent my whole life learning how to read and write runes – you know, follow the heavenly bodies, and interpret their movements in the lives of people. Now let me tell you, in the good old days we only consulted with the powerful and wealthy – kings, governors and the like. Alas, over time I've witnessed the disintegration, downward pull of my profession – now any Tehrus, Domitar, or Hamid, all the hoi polloi, can have their charts read. Oh, the ravages of this modern age!

You're not here to listen to me go on about the good old days. Where was I, oh yes, I want to tell you about something that completely changed my life. It all started with a star – I'm not sure if it was in the night sky, or in my right eye. But I concluded that something far beyond me was calling me. And...to be honest I was glad for an excuse to get out of town...away from peoples' high expectations and the

disappointing returns. So I set out with camels, camel men and the whole retinue. It was cold, the worst time of year for such a journey – the very dead of winter. The camels were stubborn and developed sore feet. The camel men cursed and grumbled, but they did have their liquor and women. The villages were unfriendly and dirty, and the towns charged high prices. Because of the star, we travelled at night, getting snatches of sleep during the day light hours....forever tired, with voices singing in my ears that this was all folly.

When I thought I could not go one step further, I met up with two other magi on the road to Jerusalem – Caspar and Balthazar. Like me, they were convinced that the star was leading them, and probably Jerusalem was a likely place to meet a king.

We had no trouble gaining entrance to the palace; we looked rich enough to get us a royal audience. However, the king we met was something of a disappointment. He was old and fat and he had terrible breath. His skin was all yellow, as if the bile had gotten the best of him. Realizing he was not the one, we asked if he knew about any other kings in the general area.

He had been cutting his fingernails until then. For the first time he stared at us and saw the stars in our eyes, his own eyes grew perfectly round, like the eyes of a snake. He excused himself, consulted with his clergy, who whipped out their scrolls, and pointed to something in the book of Micah, about a new ruler for Israel. But it had been there a long time, and nothing to be excited about.

The king did take it seriously. He gargled, combed his hair, and came back to tell us to go to Bethlehem – at once, with his blessing, on the condition that we would come back, tell him who his successor would be, so he could send flowers.

Back in the night air, we could see the star clearly and it lead us to the door of a one-room house in Bethlehem...not exactly the kind of place you would normally find a king. But the star had chosen that house. We knocked, and when the door opened the couple inside nearly died of fright. We stumbled in with all our paraphernalia – bumping our turbans and catching our clothes on the rough furniture. But then we saw a baby, and his right eye shone with the same star that I saw before I left home. It was he, whoever he was. We didn't have a clue who he was, but we did the right thing, we got down on our knees and worshipped him. Then we realized we brought

all the wrong things, they could have been some goat's milk, a warm blanket, shiny mobile to put over his crib. But how could we have guessed?

The mother was very gracious. She picked the child up, handed him around to each of us – each of us felt the soft, damp living weight in our arms. She took him back and nursed him until he fell asleep.

We hung around for a while, smiling, almost giggling with excitement. We knew we had found what we were looking for. I dozed off for a while in my chair. When I woke up slim shafts of morning light shone through the cracks.

At the door we, we each took the baby one last time in our arms, and we each raised a toast.

I said, "For this home and the love here...." and for the life of me I could not say it runes.

Caspar said, "For baby flesh.....in my hands...from now on, I'll stop living on just herbs and barley soup!"

Balthazar said, "For a really great story....telling it will be better for me than walking on hot coals!"

We trooped outside, stretched, kissed the baby good-bye, and went home by another way.

That was a long time ago. "We returned to our places. These kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." (TS Eliot, *"The Journey of the Magi"*). What has kept me going for all these years since?... that star in the heavens that led me to the child... or maybe it was the star in my right eye... but for certain, that star was in the baby's eye... and that has made all the difference.

The writer of this sermon is indebted to:

TS Eliot *"The Journey of the Magi"*

Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999.