

Matthew 2:1-12

“Home by another way”

I have come to believe that no matter how young or old you are, you can look back over your life and recognize what I call “Ah-hah!” moments. These are the times in life when you really get it! When something becomes so clear to you that you say to God, “Ah-hah!” kind of like that old commercial, “Wow, I could have had a V8”.

When our daughter Katie was doing her student teaching, she called me one day with that breathless excitement that children reserve for their mothers. She started right in on a story about a little girl in her class who had never understood fractions. Then she went on rapidly talking about how to actually DO fractions and frankly, since it was 5th grade math, she was over my head at this point. Next she told me how, all of the sudden, the little girl understood everything and before I could even compliment her she asked, “Mom, can you BELIEVE IT? I TAUGHT somebody something! Of course, what happened was that both Katie and the little girl had their own “Ah-hah” moments.

You have had “Ah-hah!” moments in your life too, I am sure. Perhaps it took place on the playground when you first learned the lesson of forgiveness. Perhaps it was when you lost something that you thought was very valuable and then realized that you didn’t need it after all. Perhaps it was the gratitude that you felt as you held the hand of a dying parent. Perhaps it was the way you sensed God’s presence when you heard the Yarborough girls sing in church on Christmas Eve just this year. Whatever our “Ah-hah!” moments I am also sure of one more thing. We are not the same as we were before. We must go home by another way.

Matthew's story that we heard this morning tells us that the wise men must have had an "Ah-hah!" moment when they came to the manger to see the Christchild. We don't really know much about these wise men – who they were or where they came from. We do know that they were curious about the birth of a new king and came prepared to honor him with gifts.

Only Matthew tells us about the visit of the Magi and HIS birth account is focused primarily on kings. We are introduced to King Herod, are told that the baby is the "king of the Jews" and read about Jesus being visited by these three kings from the east. Actually, the Bible calls them wise men, and never mentions any number, but they have manifested themselves in the form of three kings in our modern-day nativity scenes. The truth is that they were probably astrologers from Persia or Syria and we have assigned the number "3" over the years because of the gifts that were mentioned in our Scriptures.

Why is it that Matthew's account is so filled with royalty? Was it just to give us another Christmas carol! I believe that each gospel was written for a specific purpose and Matthew wrote his gospel directly to the Jews. He was trying to convince the Jews that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament Messianic promise – therefore, he was the king that they had waited for. And it was customary in that day for Kings to visit other kings.

Whoever these visitors were, Matthew lets us know in several ways that these men knew and understood who Jesus was even before they saw him. They were the ones to first ask King Herod where they could find the King of the Jews so somehow or other, his status had been made known to them. They recognized him for who he was.

By this account, Herod is not a very nice person. So, I was surprised in my research to discover that he was known as Herod the Great for a reason. I knew that it is believed that Herod rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem and that would certainly make him great. But one historian that I read said that not only was he the only ruler to keep peace and bring order to Palestine in many years. Also he was also a very generous king. One account reports that he remitted taxes during a famine and even melted his own gold plate to buy food for the hungry. Wouldn't it be wonderful if that were the kind of world rulers we have today?

But Matthew doesn't portray this to us at all. He only lets us know that Herod is threatened by a prospective rival and sends the visiting kings as spies. He does this on the premise of visiting the new king himself so that he could pay homage, but Matthew lets us know that this is most likely not the case. However, I believe that since the kings never got back to Herod with the report he was waiting for, they must have had an "Ah-hah!" moment at the manger.

The Scriptures tell us three things specifically that clue us into the realization that the Magi experienced something out of the ordinary when they saw Jesus. First, we are told that they were overwhelmed with joy and knelt down and paid homage. I think that joy is often something that is lacking in our religion and in our churches. Back in my first life, I was the children's choir director at my home church – teaching the 4, 5 and 6 year olds how to sing. I will never forget the Sunday that they were singing, "I've got that joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart" and one little fellow was literally screaming at the top of his lungs. You know, there is one in EVERY little kids' choir that thinks that singing loud is the same thing as singing good. But when we got through, every person

there was really smiling with joy at his enthusiasm and, I think God would like US to be that joyful in our worship.

That is why the Psalmist says, “Make a joyful noise to the Lord.” We don’t all have to sing as beautifully as our choir does. We simply sing knowing that we are joyfully praising God for all that God does for us.

Evangelist Billy Sunday once said: “If you have no joy in your religion, there’s a leak in your Christianity somewhere.” Our churches today may be leaking but the Wise Men did not have that problem. They were so joyous that they went right down on their knees to worship and adore the one that they were sure was THE most important King of all. There certainly was no leak in THEIR faith or their worship.

Secondly, Matthew tells us that the kings brought Jesus gifts. Now, it was customary for kings visiting from neighboring kingdoms to bring gifts to the host king if something important had happened in his country. The building of a new palace or the birth of a long-awaited son. So, it was not COMPLETELY unusual that the Magi brought gifts for the king of the Jews. However, there is something almost prophetic about WHAT they brought him.

First, they brought him gold. Now this was a gift given to royalty to recognize their kingly status so gold would have been expected. But gold for a child, born in a backwater town to unwed teenagers would have been unusual to say the least. However, they also brought him frankincense. This was a gift that was traditionally give only to priests. In those days, a good Jew believed that he had to go through a priest in order to approach God.

Those of us who live on this side of the manger and the cross know that Jesus became our priest. Jesus assumed the role of priest by becoming the mediator between God and us in prayer. That is why we always end our prayers in his name. He is the only intercessor or mediator that we need. He goes directly to God on our behalf.

Priests were also responsible for handling the sacrifices so they would be properly performed. In the Old Testament, many different sacrifices were prescribed to atone for the sins of the people. But not one every REALLY erased their sins.

However, when Jesus entered Heaven after his death on the cross, God must have said, “Finally – a sacrifice that is acceptable.” Therefore, we do not have to make sacrifices because Jesus paid the ULTIMATE sacrifice for each one of us. So, the role of priest is no longer needed. Is it possible that the Magi were foreshadowing the part that Christ would play in our lives?

Lastly, the kings brought him myrrh. This is the most interesting gift of all. You see, myrrh was a gift that was brought to someone whom you knew was going to die. Now certainly, everyone is going to die eventually, but it would be strange to take myrrh to a newborn babe.

Yet, we read in Mark’s gospel that Jesus was offered a mixture of wine and myrrh on the cross and in John’s gospel that Joseph of Arimathea brought myrrh to anoint his body with before his burial. Again, were the magi simply astrologers or were they prophets as well? It is clear by the gifts that they bore that this was no ordinary baby and that they understood that he had been sent to earth for a very special purpose.

However, the strongest clue that we have that these foreign dignitaries understood *who* Jesus was is in the last line of our text this morning. Matthew tells us that they left

for their own country by another road. Friends, I do not believe that they were simply afraid to go back to Herod and make a report or even that they didn't want to be responsible for leading the jealous king to the baby. I believe that Matthew means that they went away as different people. They came to the manger, they saw the babe, they had an "Ah-hah!" moment and they could only go away changed. They had ABSOLUTELY no choice but to go home by another way.

What I mean is that the lives of these three kings were never the same again. They went home and made new decrees to their people if they were true kings. Decrees of loving and sharing and taking care of each other and above all, of worshiping Christ with their lives. If they were astrologers, they never saw the stars the way they had before. Rather than superstitions or predictions they saw only the glorious artwork of God. If they were sages who had been given the gifts of understanding dreams, ALL their future dream interpretations were of an ETERNAL PARADISE with the one true God. They simply could not do what they had done before. They could not feel what they had felt before. They could not believe what they had believed before.

Did you make it to the manger this year? What stands out to you about this year's Christmas event. Was it seeing family or singing Christmas carols or coming to church? Was it that school got out so close to Christmas that you felt rushed to get it all done or that annoying Christmas letter you get each year from the friend who writes about her perfect life? Or the fact the people evidently doubled up on their "crazy" pills while driving during the holidays? Was it the joy you felt when you found the perfect gift on Amazon for the person who has everything?

All of these things are present and important at Christmas. However, none of them are THE PRESENT at Christmas. The present at the manger of Bethlehem is the empty tomb of Calvary. And somewhere during Christmas if you heard a sermon or sang a song or read a story that reminded you of THIS gift, I hope that you went “Ah-hah!” Because once we have been to the manger and really seen the Christ child, we can ONLY go home by another way. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf

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