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“Finding Our Way to Jesus”

Matthew 2:1-12

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi 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, Herod 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 magi and learned from them the exact time when the star 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, the magi offered the child 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.

Matthew 2:1-12

I like to think of myself as an innovative, avant-garde, and cutting-edge minister, so I am always on the lookout for books that will make me look more radical than I actually am. Brian McLaren titled his new book to attract ministers like me: *Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed, and the Disillusioned*. McLaren and his publisher set a trap and I fell for it. Without having read a page, I invited everyone to read the book and come talk about it at the parsonage. I should have paid more attention to the title. I should have taken it more seriously. I cannot say I was not warned.

Do I Stay Christian? begins with ten chapters filled with strong reasons to stop being Christian. Christianity has a horrifying history of antisemitism, which continues. Christianity has a habit of destroying Christians who have even slightly different ideas. Christianity has supported slavery, White supremacy, and Christian nationalism. Christianity is guilty of toxic institutionalism. Christianity has operated with a disgusting level of greed.

Christianity has embraced patriarchy. Christianity has defined itself by an unforgiving theology that Jesus would not recognize. Christianity has not transformed lives the way it promises to. Some of the meanest people are Christians. Christianity has an anti-intellectual streak that rejects science and encourages terrible politics. Christianity has an aging demographic that trends toward old, discredited views.

For 70 pages, McLaren lays out reason after reason that we should be embarrassed to be Christians. He writes: "I could not stay a Christian if my only option was the old way, the old way of white Christianity, the

old way of patriarchal Christianity, the old way of Theo-Capitalistic Christianity, the old way of violent, exclusive, and authoritarian Christianity with its suppressed but real history of cruelty.”

I understand what he is saying, but I also happen to be friends with some old Christians, some white Christians, and some Christians who like capitalism.

A third of the way through the book, I am thinking, “As a minister at a Christian church, encouraging cherished church members to read this book may not be my best idea.”

McLaren, who was a pastor for 24 years, makes a strong case for sleeping in on Sundays, so I imagine people reading the first ten chapters and deciding they are done with Christianity. How should I respond to the thoughtful person who says: “I didn’t realize how much damage Christianity does. I’m out”? I hoped no one would quit reading after those ten chapters, that they would keep going, because they want to know the rest of the story.

We need to read about people who are smart enough to ask hard questions, and strong enough to keep looking for something bigger and better than they are. We need stories about finding the hope, peace, joy, and love that holds our lives together. We need the story of the wise men who find their way to Jesus.

Most of us love the hymn we just sang, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*—even though we know there probably were not three. An early tradition is that there were twelve, but a dozen was too many for the creche, so some predecessor to Hallmark decided there were three, based on the number of gifts they brought—shaky evidence

though that is.

They also were not kings. They were closer to astronomers or astrologers. The word Magi has the same root as the word magic. And they were not from the Orient, but from what is now Iran, Iraq, or Syria.

None of that keeps this from being a delightful, thoughtful, hopeful story. T.S. Eliot tells the Magi's story in his poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. Menotti tells it in his opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*.

Monty Python tells a version in *The Life of Brian*. The wise men go to Brian's house first. When they realize their mistake, they take their gifts back and go next door to give them to Jesus.

In *Life Among the Lutherans*, Pastor Inqvist speculates that the wise men were Lutheran: "We think they may have been Lutherans because they brought gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Myrrh is a sort of casserole made from macaroni and hamburger, or as they say in the Mideast and Midwest, hammyrrh, thus the name. You bring it in a covered dish, thus the speculation that at least one of the wise men might have been (Lutheran). Maybe he was going to stop at the department store and get something expensive like gold or frankincense, but his wife, a wise woman, said, "Here, take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish." (Garrison Keillor)

Pastor Inqvist is wrong. Matthew makes it clear that his readers are not like the Wise Men. The Wise Men are not Jewish or Lutheran or Congregational. They are foreigners looking for hope wherever they can find it. Matthew's Christmas story includes Gentiles from a part of the world that did not get along with Israel. Imagine if

the sentence was “Nuclear physicists from Russia came to Washington looking for the next president.” Many Americans would be suspicious, and yet the wise men are the heroes—these strangers, newcomers, outsiders.

When Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story, she begins: “Once upon a time there were three – yes, (she says) three – very wise men who were sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each one of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise that they knew it did not matter that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.”

They set out on a journey to find out more about the world, faith, compassion, and their own hearts. They go to Jerusalem, King Herod’s capitol, to the palace, where they might reasonably expect a royal baby. They look important, so they get an audience with the king.

They ask, “Where’s the child who’s been born the king of the Jews?”

This is not a good question to ask a king who rules with fear, rage, and paranoia. Herod maintains fortresses in six places so that he will always have a place to escape. He executes his favorite wife and three of his sons when he thinks they want his crown. One commentator describes Herod as “history’s most hysterical megalomaniac”—which is saying a lot.

King Herod is upset with the question, because he is the king of the Jews. Herod is a toady for the Romans, but he has a lot of power as long as he does not displease his

Roman overlords. How dare these foreigners ask such a question?

Herod wants to learn who this new rival might be, so he plays along with the Magi: “What makes you think a new king has been born?”

The wise men say, “We’ve seen a star that heralds the birth of God’s Anointed One.”

Herod has not noticed any star. What are they talking about?

The Magi ask, “Do your prophets say where the Anointed One will be born?”

Herod assembles the reference librarians: “The prophet Micah wrote that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.”

Herod says, “Well, that’s not much, but go to Bethlehem and look around. If you find anything that looks like a royal baby, come back and tell me. I would like to, um, I want to, uh, pay my respects.”

The wise men set out again, following the star. Have you ever tried to follow a star? Really? Can you tell where it is leading you? Do you know which house any given star might be shining over? Seems unlikely. Matthew knows that. Something bigger than an astronomical anomaly is going on. We are supposed to follow our own guiding star.

The Magi follow their star to Bethlehem. What the wise men find is a poor child in modest surroundings, lying in his teenage mother’s arms. It is not much of a house for a king. No stone towers. No soldiers outside the door. No signs of wealth. Just an ordinary house, some carpentry tools, simple tables, chairs, and beds. This vulnerable mother, father and child receive the strangers with

hospitality. The Magi present the baby with gifts worthy of a king.

Joseph and Mary say, "Thank you."

Mary passes the baby around, so everyone gets a chance to hold him. She takes him back and nurses him until he falls asleep. When the Magi pick up their packs, which are lighter than before, they turn to the baby to thank him for the gifts he has given them.

Mary asks, "What do you mean?"

The first wise man thanks Joseph and Mary and their baby "for this home and the love here." The second wise man thanks them for letting him hold the baby, an experience that was new and exhilarating for him. The third wise man says, "Thanks for a really great story." And the wise men kiss the baby good-bye. (Barbara Brown Taylor)

In the morning, the Magi decide not to go back to King Herod. One of them had a disturbing dream. It is better to leave the king in the dark. The Magi go home by another way.

In his song *Home by Another Way*, James Taylor sings:

"Those magic men the Magi
Some people call them wise
Or Oriental, even kings
Well anyway, those guys
They visited with Jesus
They sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme
They went home by another way
Yes, they went home by another way
Home by another way

The Magi pull out their maps and chart a new route. After they see Jesus, they realize there is more than one way to go home. They go home with Jesus in their hearts.

They travel this long, hard journey because they have an inkling—a feeling, that they can find something important. They are hungry for understanding. They know there is something they need to find.

We know there is something we need to find. We have this longing for purpose and meaning. We have felt God inviting us to give our gifts. That is why we come to church. That is why we read books that matter.

The second section of *Do I Stay Christian?* is ten chapters, 72 pages, of reasons we should remain Christian. Leaving Christianity hurts the people who are trying to make it better. Good Christians need our help. Leaving defiantly or staying compliantly are not the only options. We can stay defiantly. We can fight for a better faith from inside the church, pushing for transformation.

We can understand Christianity as a way of life, more than a set of beliefs. Christianity can become more beautiful and enlightened. We need the help of like-minded people to make the world better. We should stay Christian, most of all, because of our love for Jesus. How could we give up now, when so much has been accomplished, and there is so much yet to do?

Despite all the lousiness of Christian history, Christianity remains, at its best, a path to understand our hearts on the way to becoming more fully human, “passionately eager to embody a way of being human that is pro-justice, pro-kindness, and pro-humility.”

By the end of the book, McLaren sounds like a preacher again. He invites his readers “to become the most just, kind, and humble version of ourselves that we possibly can” as we “practice a faith that expresses itself in love” so that we might “lean with others into a new kind of humanity.”

You and I can follow our guiding star, pay attention to the longing we feel, and find our way to Christ. We can desire the good of the planet, the good of all people, beginning with the poor and most vulnerable. We can participate in a love that is bigger than we are. We can join God in God’s love for God’s children. We can hear Jesus’ calls to the perpetual rethinking of repentance, and the cultivation of the beginner’s mind. We can live with awe, wonder, and curiosity.

We can follow the life and example of Jesus, teaching others by our example to live by Jesus’ nondiscriminatory love and courageous truth-telling. We can grow in our understanding of the world, faith, compassion, and our own hearts. We can go home another way.

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