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Of Horoscopes and Experts

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

One of my favorite all-time movies, “Men in Black”, stars Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones as agents in a top-secret government agency charged with keeping track of all of the aliens living on earth disguised as regular human beings. The story hinges on Will Smith as a New York City Cop who encounters an alien and so has his whole view of reality challenged and changed. It is really funny movie if you need a break from harsh reality. As secret government agents, Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones keep up with the movements of aliens on earth by reading the gossip tabloids. So, in the movie, a tabloid headline like, “Rural Couple say their life is forever changed by alien encounter!” becomes the basis of an investigation and a guide to what is actually going on in the universe.

And, if you’ve never seen “Men in Black”, then maybe you have watched the “National Treasure” movies with Nicholas Cage. In this movie franchise, Nicholas Cage and his sidekicks find massive hidden treasures by following clues so obscure or crazy that the experts have overlooked them and so missed the treasure.

Today is Epiphany Sunday; the Sunday in the church’s year when we remember how the experts always miss the treasure! Often, on this Sunday, we read the story of the visit of the Wise Men to Bethlehem and close out the celebration of the Christmas Season. Epiphany means “to reveal or to make clear.” Matthew is the only Gospel writer to tell us of foreign visitors to Bethlehem. But the story tells us that the magi from the East were clear about the identity of the child who was born in a stable in Bethlehem, while the experts were not clear at all. Matthew doesn’t say how many magi there were. Tradition has deduced that there were three only because they brought three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. And when the Magi show up in our nativity sets, they are always dressed in rich robes and crowns. We sing the hymn, “We Three Kings” to remember their visit to Bethlehem. But, Matthew does not call the visitors “kings.” They are literally “Magi” – the Greek word from which we get “magic” or “magician”. Here it denotes men from a far land who used the stars to interpret or even predict events. It is not exactly what we mean by astrology. But, it is not an inaccurate description to call them astrologers – those who read the stars and drew from them wisdom, instruction and guidance for their lives and countries. So, while a Bible translation would draw stiff resistance if it said, “astrologers 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,” that is in fact what the text says.

Now, it is not exactly astrologers in the sense in which we might now mean “astrologers” – our great aunt Betty who reads tea leaves and believes that the astrological sign under which we are born determines our destiny. But, to say that the strangers from the East who showed up at the palace in Jerusalem thought that astrological happenings both foreshadowed and made sense of things happening on earth would be right. We have called them kings, because of the gifts they brought and because it makes us feel better to have foreign kings visit Jesus. The text does not call them “Kings”. But whatever you call them – the magi/wise men are “not from ‘round here.” They were not Jews. And when they showed up and asked King Herod for directions and further clarity – thinking that surely the fellow who called himself “King of the Jews” and who lived in the palace in Jerusalem would know such things – Herod calls his resident religious think tank for a consultation. Herod convenes the Sanhedrin – the chief priests and scribes of the people – to see if they know anything about another “king of the Jews” that is not him! Herod calls the brain trust, the think tank, the experts in Scripture to see if they know anything about a reference in Scripture to the anointed king, the Messiah, about which the foreign astrologers ask. And sure enough, the chief priests and scribes pick up pieces from multiple places in Scripture that identify Bethlehem as the site where the Messiah would be born.

Couple of things. First, Matthew says that when the Eastern Astrologers first inquired about a new King of the Jews, that King Herod was “frightened and all Jerusalem with him.” Classic Biblical hyperbole. We can understand why Herod would be frightened. If he is the King of the Jews and another political challenger – named by the stars themselves – has arrived, then Herod has a fight on his hand. But “all Jerusalem”? There were plenty in Jerusalem under the rule of Rome who would have liked a regime change. More likely, Herod and all of those who benefited from him staying in power were afraid. It was unlikely that the Chief Priests and Scribes were afraid. They would have loved for Herod to be replaced with the Messiah. But notice that they do not say to the Eastern Astrologers, “We too are expecting a Messiah! Let us show you a short cut to get there! Let us come with you.” Instead, the Chief Priests and Scribes pronounce their Scriptural expertise and wisdom with a yawn and go back to bed, leaving Herod to deal with the unexpected visitors from an unnamed country. They probably said, “People who think they can tell the future by looking at stars! Pshaw! We are the ones who can tell the future! We are the experts in Scripture and if God is going to show up, we would be among the first to know!”

That the Chief Priests and Scribes didn’t get up and hot-foot it to Bethlehem, probably provided Herod with some comfort. If it really were the Jewish King and Messiah, he thought, the Jewish Religious Leadership would probably go and see. But, just in case, Herod summons the Eastern Astrologers secretly – says Matthew – and instructs them to come back to him if they find anything oh yeah! so he can bring the baby a present also. What a nice man, that Herod!

So you have the Eastern star readers who say that the Messiah has been born and come to the logical center of Jewish power to ask for directions. And the experts – both in religious and

political power – don't know anything about it. It is a little bit like reading the Hollywood Tabloids to determine when the Alien invasion is going to happen. It is a little bit like reading my horoscope to determine what I should or should not do today. It is a little bit like finding a treasure map on the back of the Declaration of Independence.

The foreign magicians/magi/wise men follow their hunch and find a king before which they kneel and offer gifts. The political and religious experts, just went back to bed and said, "If you see anything interesting, let us know."

Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher and theologian from the late 1800's, wrote:

Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to see him. Similarly, we may be able to explain every article of our faith, yet remain spiritually motionless. The power that moved heaven and earth leaves us completely unmoved.

What a contrast! The three kings had only a rumor to go by. But it spurred them to set out on a long, hard journey. The scribes, meanwhile, were much better informed, much better versed. They had sat and studied the scriptures for years, . . . But it didn't make any difference. Who had the more truth? Those who followed a rumor, or those who remained sitting, satisfied with all their knowledge?ⁱ

It is not enough to know the answer. It is not enough to say that we believe the right things. Right here at the beginning of the Gospel, it is clear that the coming of the Messiah requires NOT an intellectual assent to the right theological precepts. Right here at the beginning, the coming of Jesus into the world underscores the absolute need to get up and go. To know who Jesus is, we cannot stay home or settle for theological certainty. To see God at work, we must leave our certain predictions at home to follow the hunch. If we want to worship the newborn King, we have to leave Jerusalem. To understand what is really happening in the universe, we must move, change, travel, and act on what we know. To understand what is really happening we must bring our gifts and kneel before the manger. The Chief Priests and Scribes knew the right answer, but they did nothing about it, so they missed the main event. God always speaks first to the outsider, the weak one, the unexpected and the second born. And, it is important to remember that while the Chief Priests and Scribes knew the right answer, they did NOTHING.

The time has come to say, we cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ and stay put in the palaces of power and the security of our expert opinions. It is not expert opinions that save us. Think tanks, economic predictions and political prognosticators tell of us of only a certain kind of news. The news that makes sense of the whole universe, the news that makes sense of our lives, the news that – alone – can make suffering bearable, comes to us from foreign astrologers and stinky shepherds. And to know it, to see it, to be able to worship, we have to change and move and leave our certainty and security behind. The only thing that saves us is

the God who showed up in a rural, middle-eastern backwater town, heralded by foreign astrologers. To know what is happening in the universe, we must be willing to travel, to change, to kneel before those who are not our equals. I'm not sure why that is so hard to remember when the story is just so clear.

What journey must we take to get to the Messiah? What needs to change? What must we do to welcome the Son of God? Will we travel to greet him, or just yawn, certain of our own answers, and stay where we are?

¹ Soren Kierkegaard from Watch for the Light as quoted by The Daily Dig [Plough Publishing, Walden, New York} for January 1, 2019.