

Who Is In Charge?

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Today is January 6, the Feast of the Epiphany. This is one of my favorite feasts and it rarely falls on a Sunday. For this reason I cannot resist posing a classic question. You may have heard it before, but please indulge me:

What would have happened if there had been Three Wise WOMEN instead of Three Wise MEN? They would have: asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, made a casserole and given practical gifts.

Ah, but the wise men: who cannot help but love the intrepid wise men? These men study the night sky with all its mysteries, looking for signs of the divine. We don't know anything about them beyond the description you just heard from the gospel. Later traditions will describe them as three kings and give them names. Nativity scenes will provide them with camels for transportation. It is easy to guess that they are educated men of wealth. They present themselves at Herod's palace as citizens of the world who understand proper protocol. They certainly have fine taste in gifts. The wise men bring the Baby Jesus expensive incense, they give him ointment used for royal burials, and they also offer him gold, which is everybody's favorite.

But the most endearing things about the Wise Men are their open hearts and minds. They travel a great distance in search of an unknown baby king. They do not appear to be burdened by preconceived notions. When they are led to the stable in a provincial town, they do not express shock or contempt. The Bible says they are overwhelmed with joy. The wise men kneel on the dirt floor just as if they were in the marble halls of the emperor's court. They bow down and offer their grown-up gifts to an infant. And then, having been warned of danger in a dream, they take a different road home. The wise men exit the pages of the Bible and take up permanent residence in our imaginations. They trust the divine sign and follow it, even when the path keeps changing. They take risks because they are seeking a new authority for their life.

Authority and power swirl around this story: who is in charge? On the local level there is the evil King Herod, the puppet ruler of the oppressive Roman occupation. Herod is a vicious tyrant who has an economic stranglehold on the people. He builds massive monuments to himself, even the great Temple in Jerusalem. But his power is never enough. When he hears that there is a baby somewhere who is destined to become a king, he wages war against all of Bethlehem's children. Herod will not tolerate even a hint of competition and executes members of his own family when he suspects disloyalty. Violence against children comes easily to Herod.

This is the world in which the wise men travel. The air is thick with danger and conspiracy as they wind their way through Herod's domain. But the wise men are never distracted. Somewhere along the way they figure out that the power of Herod is not what it seems. It has tremendous and terrifying force but no moral authority. Herod's power is violent and rich and self-glorifying. It is predictable for its cruelty.

The wise men are searching for a different kind of authority, a deeper revelation. The real authority for humanity belongs to God. It is predictable for its compassion and generosity. In the

fullness of time, God's authority rests in Jesus, a baby born in earthy circumstances. God's authority often shows up in the unexpected. What a contrast we have in this story between the cruel power of Herod and the peaceful, hopeful authority of God displayed in the new life of a child. The wise men lead us as they follow a star and choose their king. They show us who is really in charge as they kneel before Jesus.

Who is in charge now? In the first week of 2008, this question has emerged as the dominant issue around the world. In Pakistan, in Iraq, in the Sudan, in many countries, the fight over power is deadly. In Kenya, last week's post election violence has resulted in hundreds of deaths. Once again, Herod wages war against children and the slaughter of the innocents now takes place in East Africa. Photographs of rows of tiny Kenyan corpses tear our hearts. All of this is for the fight over power. Who is in charge? What does it take? Who will be the king, the prime minister, the president?

Who gets to be in charge of us? Here in this country we are consumed with the presidential primaries, perhaps to the neglect of other pressing needs. Political analysis and the parsing of candidates' statements fill our newspaper headlines. Yet the 17% rise in the number of homeless families in Boston only made the back pages of the *Globe* yesterday. Who is in charge? I thank God that our democratic process is safe and open compared to other parts of the world. But pay careful attention to the campaign trail and how power is used, promises are made, and what costs are paid as we elect our leaders.

The wise men bring gold and frankincense and myrrh to Jesus, and they also share a gift with us. They show us how individuals live faithfully in the midst of complex systems of power. They live in the world but look beyond it for strength and guidance. They realize that their own culture does not contain all truth and are willing to look further for inspiration. Oh, the wise men may study their astronomy charts to find the big star, but from that point on their search is open-ended. They surely experience Caesar's power. How can they miss it as they choke on the dust from Roman chariot wheels? But the wise men are searching for a higher authority. They never take their eyes off the guiding star.

These days it is often hard to see the stars. The city lights and winter clouds block our view of the night sky. The wise men would be shocked if they searched the heavens in 2008. But we are not left unguided. We who seek the authority of Christ in our lives find stars along the way, and we share them through our stories.

A contemporary church historian tells the story of the day that she lost everything. Her job was terminated, her marriage failed, and she sat on the floor of an empty apartment surrounded by her textbooks. After a long night of anguish, she got up and went to work, leading an effort to revitalize Main Line Protestant Churches. Her passion is for churches that follow Christ faithfully in a changing world. Now many years later, she has become an authority and we use her books here at Trinity. Her crisis years ago confirmed her commitment to Christ and now she leads others.

There are many stories: we have members of Trinity who have established micro-enterprise in Central American communities. Their lives are enriched as they share their business knowledge with local artists and help them build income. These groups from different cultures have been led to one another through their faith journeys and blessings are shared all around.

And you have your own story. There has been that time of indecision or crisis, the day when your back was against the wall and someone helped you find your way. Perhaps it was only a moment, perhaps it has been a lifetime, and now you are here. Give thanks and name the star that guided you. As we live into this New Year, follow the path that leads you closer to God. Look for the star that draws you more deeply into relationship with God and with your neighbor. Follow the one who gives light to the world. Christ is in charge, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Amen.