

Date: January 3, 2016
 Scriptures: Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12
 Title: The Wise Men's Unwitting Revelation

We know their story well.
 We know it because Matthew included it in his gospel.
 They were wise men traveling from the East.
 Tradition tells us there were three of them,
 one Caucasian, one African, one Asian,
 and names them Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior
 But, Matthew refuses to embellish their story
 and so heightens their mystery.
 He only says they were following a star,
 seeking the one born King of the Jews,
 traveling from afar to worship him.

The wise men were astrologers,
 men who tracked the stars
 in an effort to discern the future.
 Their journey took them to Jerusalem,
 to a people whose beliefs and practices
 were vastly different from their own;
 a people who despised and distrusted them;
 a people, who would have gladly
 ignored and avoided them
 had they not appeared on their door step.
 No matter,
 they were committed to following the star
 even if it led them to knock
 on King Herod's door.

Who might the wise men be if Jesus were born today?
 Would they come from some distant planet
 bearing never before seen gifts of the galaxy?
 Or would they be,
 as they were two thousand years ago,
 seekers from planet earth,
 people outside established religion,
 who follow truth
 wherever it may lead them?
 Perhaps they would be New Agers,

people who also look to the stars for new truths
 and use crystals for healing
 and tarot cards to make decisions.
 They might be folks who characterize themselves
 as spiritual but not religious,
 people who forsake organized religion
 to undertake an inward journey
 of growth and discernment.
 Or they might be Millennials,
 today's young adults who are more interested
 in math and science than anything
 religious or anything spiritual..
 Surely, at least one of them would be a woman.

TS Eliot, the great 20th century American poet, tells his story of the magi in *The Journey of the Magi*.

A cold coming we had of it,
 Just the worst time of the year
 For the journey, and such a long journey;
 The way deep and the weather sharp,
 The very dead of winter.'
 And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
 Lying down in the melting snow,
 There were times we regretted

 The summer palaces on the slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel-men cursing and grumbling
 And running away,
 and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.
 At the end we preferred to travel all night,
 Sleeping in snatches,
 With the voices singing in our ears, saying
 That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate Valley,
 Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
 With a running stream and a water-mill
 beating the darkness,
 And three trees on the low sky,
 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
 Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves
 over the lintel,

Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
 And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
 But there was no information, and so we continued
 And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
 Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory
 All this was a long time ago, I remember,
 And I would do it again, but set down
 This set down.
 This: were we led all that way for
 Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
 We had evidence and no doubt.
 I had seen birth and death,
 But had thought they were different; this Birth was
 Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death,
 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
 But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
 With an alien people clutching their gods.
 I should be glad of another death.”

This wonderful poem

not only captures the mystery of the magi's journey,
 it also conjures up images of the journey
 Jesus undertakes as God's messiah --
 the cities hostile
 and the towns unfriendly,
 three trees on the low horizon,

hands dicing for pieces of silver,
birth like death.

That, however, is not all it does.

It also has embedded in it

Eliot's personal journey from disbelief to faith –

no longer at ease here,

in the old dispensation,

with people clutching their gods

glad of another death.

The death of which Eliot speaks was a birth,

both his and the magi's,

into a new and amazingly different life.

None of us can encounter God's messiah

and not be changed.

We will always go home by another way

and call our previous way of living

the old dispensation.

Bob Kerry, a former US senator from Nebraska,

grew up going to the movies Saturday morning

and church every Sunday.

The heroic stories he heard and saw there

merged in his subconscious

and played a substantive role

in his understanding of life.

Viet Nam changed all that.

With the shattering of his right leg

came the shattering of his innocence.

In his memoir, *When I Was a Young Man*, Kerrey writes

"I ... suffered physical and spiritual loss.

I had spent my life preparing for easy decisions

and when the difficult one came I wasn't ready.

Physical stamina and intellectual strength

were not enough."

Haunted by a raid he led in Viet Nam

which resulted in the killing of women and children.

he turned to the faith of his childhood for peace

and listened hopefully as his minister

told him God would forgive

if only he asked.

Kerrey did as his minister suggested,
but peace eluded him.

Yet, over time,

Kerrey did experience forgiveness in “small doses”
and at “unexpected moments.”

The kindness of people during his long recovery
and later the kindness of many others
were a healing balm of forgiveness.

Later still,

he came to believe that kindness,
unselfish and unafraid,
is a bedrock reality,
one to believe in and build on.

Kindness –

It’s God’s amazing kindness that healed Bob Kerrey,
and it’s that same kindness we see
when we look at the wise men.

Of course, we see

their willingness to undertake a long, arduous journey
and their courageous persistence
and their openness to new forms of revelation.

But what we see most is God’s kindness.

That is what the wise men,

outcasts in a foreign land,
unwittingly reveal as they kneel
before the Christ child.

The kindness of God loving and calling people
from the four corners of the earth
to God’s self.

Wittingly and unwittingly, each of us reveals
who we are and what we believe.

As we begin this new year,

what will each of us reveal?

Will we reveal the old dispensation,

our old ways of thinking and doing?

Or will we choose to go by another way

and in so doing

reveal God’s kindness to us and all people?

You may say,

“I have already made that choice.”

And so you have.

But the old dispensation is ever with us,
and its values not easily shed.

The question is always worthy of asking,
for wittingly and unwittingly
we are constantly answering it.

Amen.