

"Those Who Dream ... Persevere"

Matthew 2:1-12

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Celebration of Epiphany (a few days early)

January 3, 2021

Do the magi really believe Herod that he wants to pay homage to this newborn king? We do not know. But we know that Herod wants this knowledge in order to eliminate this new threat to his reign. Knowledge is power. On this, king and magi seem to agree.

Yet Herod and the magi approach knowledge from vastly different perspectives. Herod treats knowledge as an essential weapon in his quiver of control through violence or the threat of violence. Stars and magi and prophets are suppliers of ammunition to a king who wants to silence his opposition. For Herod, knowledge is like any other commodity - bought, sold, traded, and acquired as a thing to be used for advantage in a competitive game of winners and losers. Knowledge outside of his control is cause for fear.

The magi, on the other hand, treat knowledge as the guide that leads them into new revelation. Knowledge is not something to be acquired, but beheld. Not something to be owned or managed, but observed and shared. And this leads them confidently into the realm of the unknown, where like docks in a harbor, they stand ready to receive vessels bearing new truths, ready to understand new forms of power, ready to behold new miracles. Knowledge outside of their control is not cause for fear, but grounds for awe. Awe that leads them into deeper inquiry and investigation.

As the divisions deepen in our own world today, I'm afraid that we are becoming more like Herod and less like the magi. Pursuing knowledge as a means for our control instead, instead of allowing knowledge to guide us into awe and deeper inquiry.

It's conventional wisdom in many of the circles that we run in today to divide the world up into those who "believe in science" and those who "do not." On the one side we have those of us who, for example, wear masks, see that climate change is real and deadly, and who trust in vaccinations for ourselves and our children. On the other we have those who reject masks, deny climate science, and turn public health guidance into partisan warfare. Let's assume for a moment that this description, however oversimplified, is mostly true. In that case, the antidote to the problem would be to somehow convince science-denying, truth-rejecting people of the error of their ways. We might then measure our effectiveness at strategies and techniques that actually produce the kinds of change that we are hoping to see in other people. What helps people go from rejecting science to appreciating it. What nurtures in others a love of investigation, a marveling in the presence of the unexplained instead of fearing it? What helps change people's minds?

What I'm actually seeing more and more of is a kind of camp-like mentality that digs us deeper into our fortified trenches of group identity. Increasingly, our choices separate us into these camps - the neighborhoods where we live, the churches we attend, the politics we espouse, the tv news stations we watch, the news sites we read. The feeds that we receive on our social media apps reinforce those camps through algorithms that push us into like-minded groups making it harder for human beings to challenge, engage, and interact. So on my TikTok

feed I'll see documented police stops where police misconduct is verified, validating what I already believed to be true; I see angry maskless Karens disrespecting employees of color in coffee shops I'm apt to visit; I hear testimonies from former evangelicals educating everyone on the experiences of their oppression and the accuracy of the liberal truths they have now come to embrace. And it feels good to have what I already knew to be true, validated. I feel safe and secure in the confirmation of what I already believe and know to be true.¹

The problem, of course, is that for every person like me, there is a person on the other side of things who is receiving video clips of police disrespected in heroic acts of service; clips of arrogant liberal elites patronizing someone's rural, family-centered culture, and segments of angry atheists ripping into someone's most cherished doctrines of faith. They, too, are having their beliefs confirmed and validated from the opposite perspective.

I don't pretend to know how we change this current predicament. The classic way that moderates tried to address this predicament in the history of our own nation is by pushing everyone to the middle of whatever political continuum existed at the time. It sounds reasonable, except when you look at what it's actually meant in history - white moderates rejecting the expansion of slavery, for example, but opposing its abolition; or white moderates in Birmingham lecturing Dr. King on their support of racial equality but opposing the efforts of those who demand that it be so; or so much of the church in the last 40 years trying to sidestep LGBTQ equality by refusing to address the issues that led and continues to reinforce the exclusion of so many of us or those we love. Moving to the middle is sometimes the right answer, but not always or even often.

I'm not sure how to extricate ourselves from the current divisions but I think reassessing our relationship to knowledge is a good place to start. How we see it and how we use it. The magi used their knowledge not as a reason to rest from their quest, but in a way to deepen it. Stephen Jay Gould, the great paleontologist once said that "the most erroneous stories are those we think we know best - and therefore never scrutinize or question."² Too many of us in fields of every kind - politics, science, economics, theology - we treat what tentative truths as final conclusions. Think about how those magi got to Bethlehem. They used their existing knowledge and expertise of signs in the heavens in order to travel to the place where they thought they would find a king. Once there, they had to suspend their prior judgment by receiving new information - from prophets outside of their faith and outside of their culture enabling them to follow a star to a place where they found a child. Before returning home, they paid attention to their own dreams that led them, once again, to change their previously held direction and go a different way. They received new knowledge - time and time again - only because they were open to it.

Knowledge itself does not lead to this kind of openness. Sometimes it leads to arrogance. And arrogance is blinding, sometimes even deadly for human beings. Flight accident researchers have noticed that a disproportionate number of flight accidents happen to pilots with a particular range of flight hours. Pilots with more than 100 hours of flight time but

¹ For more information on the social media echo chambers and how to break out of them, see this recent article from *Wired* magazine, "How to Break Out of Your Social Media Echo Chamber," *Wired*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-twitter-echo-chamber-confirmation-bias/>

² Stephen Jay Gould, *Life's Grandeur: The Spread of Excellence From Plato to Darwin*, 1997.

less than 350 live within what has been coined the “killing zone.”³ As pilots get confident with greater experience, they also tend to become more comfortable, less attentive and less careful. Confidence that’s not offset by care can kill you.

Knowledge itself doesn’t lead to better outcomes. Columnist Jennifer Senior pointed out recently that more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of the members of the House and more than $\frac{1}{2}$ of the members of the Senate have law degrees. A fifth of the Senate and the House have masters degrees. More than 95% of the House has a bachelor’s degree as does every single member of the Senate. Senior points to recent work from Michael Sandel who makes the point that while there’s a good argument for having well educated representation, history shows there is very little correlation between good governance and educational attainment. The “best and the brightest” gave us Vietnam he points out, and more recently, the highly credentialed gave us “stagnant wages, financial deregulation, income inequality, the financial crisis of 2008, a bank bailout that did little to help ordinary people, a decaying infrastructure, and the highest incarceration rate in the world.”⁴ Knowledge itself doesn’t lead to better outcomes.

Having dumber people in Congress isn’t the solution, of course. It’s having less arrogance and greater connection. Look at the magi. They are likely as elite as Herod when it comes to pedigree, educational privilege, and status. The gifts they bring to Jesus and his family betray their privilege. What sets them apart is their willingness to follow that star all the way to where it leads - to a king that doesn’t fit anyone’s kingly expectations, a babe born to a poor family, outside of the normative stations of power.

Historically, the church pointed to Epiphany - which is technically this coming Wednesday, 12 days after Christmas - as the time when the good news was revealed to the Gentiles. Matthew’s Jewish perspective is on full display here criticizing his own establishment - they missed the Messiah, he argues, while visitors outside of our faith and religion recognized him for what he was. Like so much that is wrong with the church’s history, some church leaders turned that into an anti-Jewish screed - they missed their own Messiah but we didn’t.

But that’s Herod’s view of knowledge - dividing up the world into winners and losers. A better read would be to notice what joy comes to those who are willing to journey beyond their settled notions of what power can look like, of where truth resides. Notice what joy comes from people who are willing to risk leaving their own tribe, their own certainties to journey off beaten paths. Notice this multi-faith encounter where people who love truth conspire with one another to resist violence. Notice how the best kinds of religious authorities are more like sojourners than border guards. Notice how, when we listen to our dreams, we find there is more than one way home.

Stephen Jay Gould wrote that “the most important scientific revolutions all include, as their only common feature, the dethronement of human arrogance from one pedestal after

³ William Knecht recently published a paper that reviewed Paul Craig’s original *The Killing Zone* argument (published in 2001), in a paper entitled, “Predicting Accident Rates From General Aviation Pilot Total Flight Hours,” FAA, February, 2015,

https://www.faa.gov/data_research/research/med_humanfacs/oamtechreports/2010s/media/201503.pdf

⁴ Jennifer Senior, “95 Percent of Representatives Have a Degree. Look Where That’s Got Us,” *The New York Times*, December 21, 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/21/opinion/politicians-college-degrees.html>

another of previous convictions about our centrality in the cosmos.⁵ We could say something similar about the revolution of Jesus of Nazareth. He ushers in with his body what he says with his words - this new kingdom, this new realm, is foundationally decentering of most of what we latch onto in life. In its place is something much less more fragile and powerful - love for our neighbor that Jesus teaches us is, in fact, love for God. A community that is developed on this ridiculously simple model that proves to be incredibly difficult for human beings to trust, much less build together.

Yet the model endures and signs of its implementation - however incomplete - have endured, while the empires that challenged it and continue to challenge it continue to fall. The perseverance of that hope may be one of its most defining features. The magi teach us that our own perseverance in our journey toward God-with-us is less like the discipline of runners sticking to their daily regimens, narrowly focused on the single goal of conquering the race to come, and more like a child let loose in a forest - smelling this flower, and noticing another, skipping from one miracle to the next, a world teeming with gifts - too many to open; an opening of the heart, a relinquishing of control, a departure from a settled path, seeking God's guidance which leads us to overwhelming joy. In all things trusting that no matter where our journeys take us, what dangerous threats we encounter, what losses we endure, when we stay open to what is being revealed to us in stars, and texts, and dreams, and in other human beings, there is joy to be experienced and more than one way to find our way home.

⁵ I have been unable to locate the correction citation for this original quote which I believe Gould has cited in more than one location. It appears, too, that this idea may not be original to Gould, but rather to Freud. See *Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin*, (New York: Three Rivers Press), 1997, 16 and *Dinosaurs in a Haystack: Reflections in Natural History*, (New York: Random House).