

Second Sunday of Christmas (12th Day of Christmas)
January 5, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84:1-8
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

A couple of weeks ago – it was still Advent! – we heard the story of Joseph and a dream he had, a dream that propelled him to take Mary as his wife and raise Jesus as his own. As Matthew tells it, this is the story of how Jesus was born.

And then, two nights later – on Christmas Eve! – we heard a different story about a census and a child laid in a manger and angels and shepherds. As Luke tells it, this is the story of how Jesus was born.

They are not one and the same story.

And as I said – way back in Advent – I, for one, am glad we have more than one version of the story. It means that neither of these Christmas stories can lay claim to telling us what really happened. It also frees both of them – and so many other stories, besides – to do so much more.

We need not settle for dry facts, not when we have stories that show us glimpses of the mystery of Emmanuel, “God-with-us”!

What is true about the birth of Jesus is all-the-more true when we hear this morning’s gospel. The importance is not ever going to be established by an astrophysicist.

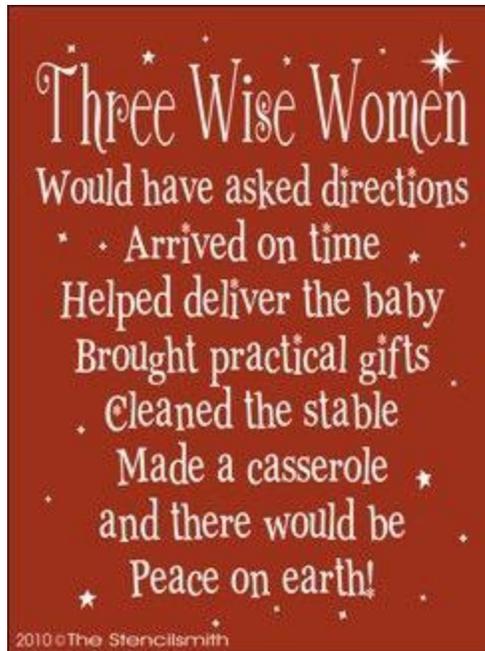
John Shea, writing about today’s gospel account of the journey of the Magi, says this:

Our concern is not with the scarcity of historical data but with the abundance of poetry and story. If the Magi reduce historical reason to silence, they thrill the artistic imagination to song. Where the historian legitimately equivocates, the poet and storyteller legitimately expound.ⁱ

And there are so many stories, so many poems. G. K. Chesterton told a story of three modern Wise Men who offered gifts of wealth and medications and the power of the atomic bomb, a critique of unquestioned confidence in the secured benefits of wealth and technology. The opening lines of T. S. Eliot’s “The Journey the Magi” tell a tale right from the start:

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey ...

They are jokes, as well. And some truth even there as well, at times: “What would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men”?



I thought of other stories I could tell. Barbara Brown Taylor turned one of her sermons into a wonderful children's picture book called *Home By Another Way* – but there are so few children among us here this morning. So I've decided to go back to a classic and remind you of "The Story of the Other Wise Man," by Henry Van Dyke, which opens this way:

In the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod ruled in Jerusalem, there lived in the city of Ecbatana, among the mountains of Persia, a certain man named Artaban ...ⁱⁱ

It's not a terribly long story, but perhaps it's still too long for a sermon, so I'll tell you the rest in a highly abridged fashion.

Artaban was a companion of three other Magi – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Like them, he was a seeker after Truth and a worshipper of the divine Light. Together, they studied the writings of the ancient religions. They searched the night skies for the signs they believed would appear. They looked for a star.

And as Artaban studied and searched, he also planned. Artaban sold all that he had, his palace with its magnificent gardens and all of his possessions, and he purchased three precious jewels – a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl – to carry as tribute to the king.

And when the star appeared, he left to join the others. It was a journey of ten days -- from where he started to where he was to meet the other three at the edge of the desert. And, by prior agreement, ten days was all they would wait before beginning their crossing. As soon as he saw the star, Artaban left. He rode swiftly, stopping to rest as little as possible. He crossed valleys and mountains, plains and pastures, fields and gardens.

At the end of ten days, he was still short of the meeting place, so he pushed on through the night. In the darkness of that last night, he came upon a man lying in the road. It was immediately clear to him that he would soon die if Artaban didn't stop to help, but he didn't have time to stop. If he went on, the man would die, yes, but Artaban would still reach his companions in time.

So he started to get back on his horse. Just then, the man gasped a faint moan and instinctively clutched at Artaban. And so he stayed, reluctantly. And resentment filled his heart, as his search for the divine was interrupted by human need.

He attended to the man, giving him water, mixing him a potion, and keeping him warm through the night. By morning he was too late. Artaban raced to the appointed meeting place, but the caravan had gone on without him. All he found was a note telling him to follow. But he had no food and no provisions to cross a desert, only a horse that could travel no further. So he turned back to find a place to sell his sapphire, so that he might hire a caravan for the journey.

He arrived in Bethlehem only a few days after the others, but it was too late.

In one house, he found a young woman with her newborn son who remembered the three strangers very well – and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. She knew of Mary and Joseph and their baby also. But they had all left, she told him, suddenly and in secret. She gave Artaban food and drink. And they talked some more, and she shared with him rumors that the family had gone to Egypt.

Later, as the mother nursed her child in silence, Artaban considered his quest for the divine.

Suddenly, the sounds of screams broke the silence, and people filled the streets crying that Herod was killing all the children of Bethlehem. Artaban leaped to his feet. He stood in the doorway as the soldiers arrived, and he gave his ruby to one of Herod's captains in order to save the life of the son who quietly nursed at his mother's breast.

By now, the only gift Artaban had was his pearl. That was all he had left to give to the king he sought. So he took it to Egypt ... and beyond. He searched for this king both far and wide, among both rich and poor. He passed through countries where there was famine, and he fed many who were hungry. He travelled in cities where there was plague, and he healed many who were sick. He visited captives held in gloomy prisons and the oppressed in slave markets.

Through it all, though he found none to worship, he found many to help. For 33 years, Artaban continued his search – and he held on to his pearl. And in the course of his years of searching, he grew old and weary – and bitter over a quest for the divine that was constantly interrupted by human need.

At the last, he decided to make one final trip to Jerusalem. It was the Jewish Passover when he arrived, and as he made his inquiries, he learned of a man called Jesus of Nazareth, who was being sent to the cross that very hour, reportedly for claiming to be "King of the Jews." Artaban followed the crowd towards the place called Golgotha, hoping that the pearl he had saved all these years might be enough somehow to save this king. But as Artaban came to the gates of the city, a young child saw him. She broke away from the guards that held her and threw herself at the feet of Artaban, begging for help. Her father, it happened, had died and left a tremendous debt. She was to be sold as a slave to repay the debt. It was, for Artaban, the way of his quest – searching for the divine, to be interrupted yet again by human need along the way. He gave away his pearl of great price in payment of the debt.

Just then, the sky darkened and the earth shook. The old man and the young girl crouched together in fear and trembling, and a tile fell from the roof of a building. It struck Artaban and he fell to the ground. The girl knelt down beside him and took him in her arms. His eyes were unfocused, but his lips were moving. And as she held him, she heard him whisper:

Not so, my Lord: for when did I see thee [hungry] and feed thee?
Or thirsty, and give thee drink?
When saw I thee a stranger, and took thee in?
Or naked, and clothed thee?
When saw I thee sick or in prison, and came unto thee?
Three-and-thirty years have I looked for thee;
but I have never seen thy face, nor ministered to thee, my King.

And then ... Well, these are the final words of the old story:

... one long, last breath of relief exhaled gently from his lips.

His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

Mind you, there's not a single fact in the story. None of it happened. Not that it matters in the least, for the story brims with the gospel truth that we who hold that Jesus is "God-with-us" need not seek that which is holy in the dustbowls of history or the sterility of dry facts. God it is we glimpse whenever we turn and wherever we show love.

ⁱ John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1996), p. 128.

ⁱⁱ Henry Van Dyke, *The Story of the Other Wise Man* (Ballantine Books, New York ... Twelfth Printing, 1988).