

The Feast of the Epiphany
January 6, 2019
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Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

The Roman Catholic priest and writer John Shea tells a story, supposedly amusing in some circles, about an old cardinal and a modern-day scholar at a dinner party. The cardinal, skeptical of all things modern, was inclined to complain about scholars who were undermining the faith.

On this occasion, he grumbled about scholars who were saying we don't know how many wise men there were. "Well, I am not one of them, I assure you," said the scholar.

"I'm glad to hear that ..." the cardinal began. But he didn't have time to finish before the scholar pronounced: "There were six!" (And as he said it, he shrugged his shoulders in a "what-can-I-tell you" gesture.)

"Six?!" blustered the cardinal. "How do you figure six?"

"Well, in a reliquary in Cologne, there are the heads of three Magi. And in a reliquary in Milan, there are the heads of three Magi. Three plus three equals six."

John Shea tells that story to make the point that we don't really know as much about the wise men as we imagine we do. ¹ And he tells the story to let us know he's good with that; he'd rather encourage our imagination our creativity than tidy up the historical record.

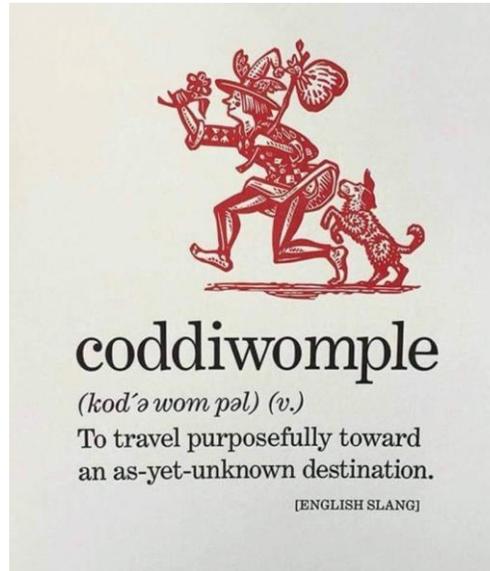
And that's just as well, because even if we take Matthew's account at face value, we really cannot prove much of anything about these mysterious travelers. Matthew uses a plural form of the noun, so it's clear that he means to tell us there was more than one of them. But there's no way to know if he imagined that there were three of them (one for each of the three gifts) or only two ... or as many as six – or sixty!

Grammatically speaking, we cannot even say (with certainty) they were all men. And Matthew doesn't say enough to make it clear to us who or what they're supposed to have been. In our translation this morning, they're described as "wise men from the East." I'd probably prefer we stay with the Greek word and call them "Magi from the East" instead. In the Christmas carol – and apparently in most nativity sets – they're royalty, of course: "kings."

None of the titles seems quite apt, however, so commentators offer words and phrases to try to tell us who they were: a band of scholars, Zoroastrian priests, astronomers, astrologists, charlatans, magicians, interpreters of dreams, philosophers.

As for me, I'm going to call them "coddiwomplers."

I may be making the word up. I base it on an English slang verb I came across this past week, "coddiwomple," defined as "to travel purposefully toward an as-yet-unknown destination."



However many of them there were, whatever else they may have been, the gift-bearing travelers sound like "coddiwomplers" to me.

And I mean that as a compliment.

Here's what we know about them. Without knowing precisely where they were headed, they left their homes and headed out. And when they get to Jerusalem, they explain that they had come all this way because of a star that they'd observed, but they didn't know exactly where to go next.

When we hear them speak of this star, I wonder if we imagine something supernatural or magical in the night sky. (And I wonder if that's why, even in modern times, some people try to make sense of it all by talking about comets and supernovas and the conjunction of planets or stars.) I wonder if we imagine it had to be something so unmistakably cosmic that it compelled them to pay attention.

I suppose that's one option. But for my part, I rather imagine them looking at the natural world around them and seeing something "MORE" there than what most others could see. I'd rather prefer to think of them as seeing an ordinary star that wasn't spectacular at all – and seeing it shot through with sacred significance. It wasn't an extraordinary star; it was their extraordinary way of looking at the world and seeking the sacred in the midst of all that others take as merely ordinary.

For they were coddiwomplers and that was their purpose: to seek out the sacred in their ordinary.

But for all that, these coddiwomplers moved uncertainly, their destination “as-yet-unknown.” And as a consequence, they don’t always know where to look, so it’s hardly surprising they end up in the wrong place.

They mount their camels and head off to Judea in the West. And then, when they get to this distant land, they head immediately to Jerusalem ... and, in short order, to the palace of Herod. It was, after all, a king they were seeking. It was natural for them to assume that the new king would be a member of the current ruling family. It was natural for them to look first in Herod’s palace.

And yet it was, of course, the wrong place to look. We know that. But they did not know that the king they sought was of a different sort entirely. How could they? It was an unprecedented notion. They had no notion that the king they were looking for would not rule by fear, that he would rule, instead, by love. (Ah, but that’s a story for another day ... or maybe for all the rest of our days.)

In any event, these coddiwomplers set out, seeking the newborn, but the details were “as-yet-unknown,” and that’s how they end up in front of Herod. It was an honest mistake.

And it’s not their fault. Not really. John Shea contrasts the wise men with the shepherds:

[The wise men] are looking for the Christ child, but they do not have exact directions and they cannot travel by day. A star leads them, a tiny point of light in a night sky ...

... [But t]he shepherds do not have to deal with a mute star. They are blessed with a very talkative angel. This angel gives them exact directions to the birthplace of the child. They will not have to consult devious kings. They are also told the identity of the child and serenaded with a song about the meaning of his birth. Once they arrive everything is exactly as they were told. They skip off to tell everyone, and to a person everyone is astonished at what they hear. ⁱⁱ

All of which is to say that the coddiwomplers had a harder time of it than did the shepherds. And so it was inevitable that they’d make a wrong turn from time to time and all-but-inevitable that they would go to the wrong place before they could get it right.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, they have to stop and ask for help ... and ultimately for directions. And that’s how they came to hear about Bethlehem.

I call them coddiwomplers. And I’ve said that I mean it as a compliment.

For you see, if they had been something less – mere tourists, perhaps – they might have given up rather than go on to a backwater hill-town called Bethlehem. But they were coddiwomplers – travelers with a purpose, and that purpose was to seek out the holy in places they did not know in advance.

And so they continue on to Bethlehem. And there they find the place where the child was born.

And I wonder who was more surprised: the three visitors? or the family being visited? Did the exotic visitors knock on the door of simple, ordinary folk, and ask to see the child who was God's chosen? Did they explain that they sought this child because of a star that guided them? Did they say that they found the child's home because of what the scholars in Herod's palace told them?

And did Joseph greet these peculiar strangers cautiously? "A child has been born here," he may have said, before adding, "He is a child like any child. Come and see."

One way or another, they make their way in. And a long, full silence follows ... as the wealthy travelers look at the poor child who was like any child and all children, at the mother who was any mother and all mothers, at Joseph who was any man and all men.

And they fall to their knees and place their gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh there. And in so doing, they proclaim that they see that which is sacred ... they see God in this small child, the holy in the family.

Most folks imagine they were wise men, and that there were only three of them. Some call them Magi, and say there were six. But I think they were coddiwomplers – purposeful travelers on their way to a destination not-yet-entirely-known. I think they were coddiwomplers, and I wonder if perhaps more of them coddiwompled to Bethlehem than ever we've imagined.

I look around on most any given Sunday, after all, and see well over a hundred coddiwomplers gathered here. For it is our purpose, at least in part, to seek that which is sacred in a secular world. And it is our calling to travel without being certain of our steps ... and we inevitably lose our way from time to time. But because we are coddiwomplers, and not merely spiritual tourists, we keep on. And so it is that we are open to being surprised and, at least from time to time, we discover that which we seek in the most surprising of places. Even here.

And here we pay homage to a child and offer our gifts. Our gold, sure. Ourselves.

ⁱ John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1992), p. 128.

ⁱⁱ John Shea, *Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long* (Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1992), p. 134.