

# “Muddy Knees”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 3, 2010*

Epiphany Sunday  
Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14  
Matthew 2:1-12

There was a tradition – at one of the churches I where I used to work – that each Christmas season, the youth group would go on an outing. Every December, we went to the same little family farm and visited the same barn where we saw the same animals. While we were there, the Christmas story would be read and we would sing carols and feed the animals, and have hot chocolate in the cold, night air.

Each year, we would warn the kids to dress warmly and wear clothes they would not mind getting muddy; because, inevitably, put teenagers in a barn with the animals, and they are going to get dirty. Every once in a while, a pair of shoes would get ruined that were not supposed to; or a couple of the kids would need to go inside the house to warm up because they had failed to bring hats or gloves.

Our hosts at this little family farm were always very gracious. They were not members of the church, and nobody could recall exactly how this tradition of visiting their farm each December began. They loved to watch the looks on the kids’ faces as they stroked the animals and sang carols in that barn – even though there was no other human audience.

Another part of this Christmas tradition was that our host family always sent to us, their visitors, a thank you card. If we visited their farm on a Sunday evening, the note would be in my box by the following Tuesday. And so, after each December visit to the little farm, a couple of the youth leaders would stick around on Sunday evening and write our own thank you card – knowing that if we waited, theirs would arrive first. After a couple of years, I came to appreciate that moment as one of the year’s most meaningful times of reflection: trying to describe why it was important for our kids to spend time in a barn in the cold, petting the animals, hopefully gaining an appreciation of what it might have been like in a stable on the first Christmas: what the shepherds and magi might have found when they reached the little town of Bethlehem and saw the newborn baby lying in a manger.

This morning, we hear the story of the magi – the three kings of the Orient – from Matthew’s gospel. Unlike in Luke’s story, there are no singing angels appearing to the shepherds in the fields. Instead, we hear about these visitors from far away who follow a star that they saw rising in the sky. They are astrologers, star-gazers, who believed in the magical portent of the natural wonder. And so, having studied the prophecies of the Old Testament about a coming king, they followed the star.

Where do these strangers come from? We are told only that they come from "the East" – the same direction from which most of Israel's conquerors had come, including Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. East of Judea is the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization. East of Judea is Babylon, where Jews were taken in Exile after the destruction of the first Temple. Some stayed behind when Jews returned to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem. “These magi,” Richard Swanson says, “were among the Gentiles who might have been influenced by the remaining Jews, helped to sense the goodness of the One True God. Quite possibly, the Magi come from the East because they had been trained to raise their eyes to the horizon of God's activity in the world, trained by their association with the Babylonian Jewish community”<sup>1</sup>

And so, while the magi were the first Gentiles to recognize Jesus as king, they could only do so because of seeds that were planted long ago by those who had a genuine relationship with God. Christ’s birth marks the fulfillment not only of God’s coming as a light into darkness, but also that God’s people become a light to the nations. The final vision of God’s plan is for all people to recognize that Christ is Lord. This revelation can be made known in ways and through people that we would not think to imagine: through strangers, through natural wonders, and through atypical signs.

Thomas Long says that "the world is full of 'stars in the East' – events in nature, personal experience, and history that point toward the mystery of God..." Still, he says, we need "the defining and clarifying word of scripture" to "recognize these holy moments for what they are...to see God's face clearly in them."<sup>2</sup>

Many people in our world are following stars that they intuitively know will never lead them to see God’s face, but they try to follow them anyway. They are in a feverish gallop to have the things they are told should represent success and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Swanson, “Provoking the Gospel of Matthew”

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Long, “Matthew,” *Westminster Bible Companion*

happiness. But after getting all that, people say, "I'm not happy. I feel like I'm in a rat-race. But now I have this house and the second mortgage and all the other stuff I'm up to my eyes in debt to pay for. I've always been told that when I got all this, I'd be happy, but I'm not."

Most of us are limited in our experiences of joy because we live under the burden of the expectations other people have of us, which keep us from being able to align with our real selves. Lots of people live fragmented lives because they try to find their center in those they are trying to please rather than within themselves. No wonder people are so dizzy; they live lives of spinning from one false center to another.<sup>3</sup>

The story of the magi can be so instructive to us because of the decisions that they made. They probably had to tune out those who said their trip was a waste of time; those who wondered why they cared about a Jewish prophecy; or how they knew to follow the star. Why would they travel to that strange land, without knowing exactly where they were going or what they would find? And, what would compel them to give expensive gifts to a stranger?

We read that when the star stopped above Bethlehem and the magi found Jesus, they were overwhelmed with joy and fell down on their knees. With joy, they realized that they had arrived at the place where they were meant to be. Although they were from a foreign land, they had arrived at the place where the divine and the human meet, where heaven and earth come together. They had finally come to a place that was, for them, like home; where their wandering souls could find rest.

But at that moment, the Magi had another decision to make. As soon as they had stopped and basked in the joy that confirmed their arrival at the right place, they had to decide whether they would do what Herod had asked. How could they fall on their knees and worship Jesus as their king, and then put him at risk by sharing their discovery with a dangerous and murderous self-proclaimed king like Herod.

The magi may not have been prepared for what they would find, but they were at least open to experience and appreciate what they did find. They may not have dressed for the mud they would find in the stable, but that did not keep them from getting down on their knees. This unlikely place was where heaven and earth

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Sargent, "The Gift of the Magi"

met, where the star that rose in their midst came to rest, where the ancient stories and prophecies that they had learned back home came true.

The last thing we are told about these magi – because are not mentioned again in scripture – is that they went home by another road. This, of course, was to avoid running into King Herod, but it may have been for another reason as well. For, their outlook had changed: they were not concerned about what they owned or where they were from; they did not care that their knees were still muddy. They had met their king and experienced true joy. After their searching, they had discovered that God was in their midst, and that God would continue to be with them, even if they returned to their home. This because God would live on in what they believed, where they placed their trust, where they placed their true identity: although foreigners by birth and strangers in the land of God's people, they had been chosen and shown the way.

The magi had decided to follow God, and in making that decision, they had found their freedom – the freedom to follow a new path.

If God was revealed to you and you somehow experienced the wonder and joy of Christ's coming – don't worry about your muddy knees. Even if you feel like a stranger in a foreign land, God wants you to spend time in the stable; to experience his joy even after all the gifts are given and the decorations are put away. May the light of Christ that has come into our midst continue to shine in all our days, everywhere that travel, so that we might also shine upon others. AMEN.