

WHEN GASPAR WENT MISSING

A COMMENTARY FOR TWELFTH NIGHT

It has long been a family tradition to mark the days of Advent and Christmastide seasons with the wood-carved characters appearing in our little crèche one by one, week after week, like unfolding scenes in a two-act drama.

First the cattle and sheep are placed nearby to simply mill about the empty manger. Then a few shepherds and other curiosity seekers show up. Finally, at sundown on Christmas Eve, Mary, Joseph and the babe take their proper places, with an angel hovering overhead. And somewhere else in the house the three wise men begin their 12-day trek to the stable.

Twelfth Night, otherwise known as the Feast of the Epiphany, is typically observed by rereading the familiar story from Matthew's gospel about those three magi arriving at the manger on bended knee to offer their extravagant gifts; thus concluding the twelve days of Christmastide (Mt. 2:1-12). Then everything is packed up and stashed in the attic, until the entire ritual is repeated all over again the following year.

But the year one of the three wise men was nowhere to be found when it came for him to enter stage left not only got me wondering about his whereabouts, but what he could have possibly been up to. Such speculation, I would suggest, may be no less credible than Matthew's fanciful, retrospective tale.

After all, we know the tradition that contributed to Matthew's drama was written decades after Jesus' death. By then the cast of characters in this story had come to represent more than just specific names, or dates or even historical places. Bethlehem as a birthplace was Matthew's own contrivance; just as Luke's nativity story was spun to construct an emerging Christology, not biography. These stories had come to represent what early Jewish-Christian communities had come to

believe more broadly about the fulfillment of messianic prophecies; and how they'd subsequently come to view the world in which they lived differently, as a result of that understanding.

For instance, whenever a name like King Herod was mentioned in the telling of such a story as the one from Matthew, I bet it was met with murmurs of disapproval, perhaps even a little booing and hissing. And those persons who were deemed to be wise, and consequently listened to their own dreams and found a new way "home," were not reserved for merely strangers on camelback.

Exactly how the earliest Christians may have heard and inculcated this tale was not so much a matter of how they might have sorted fact from fiction; but how those sundry characters themselves became *enlightened* with the radiant *epi-phanos* of deeper truths to be found in the telling and re-telling of such a tale.

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have

found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” (Matthew 2:1-12)

When I was a boy we always sang the old familiar Epiphany carol “We three kings of Orient are.” One by one, Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar -- the three names legend once ascribed to the three kings -- each sang their verse, as they offered their gifts.

There was gold, the international monetary standard. There was frankincense, which kept things smelling nice while you were alive. And there was myrrh, that kept you from smelling bad when you were dead – at least for a while. All perfectly nice gifts, fit for a king.

But they weren’t the kind of gifts you’d expect anyone to give to a Jewish infant, born to peasant parents in a backwater town of the Empire during what would become – as a result of this particular birth -- the first century of the Common Era. Which, of course, is partially the whole point of the story, I suppose.

In those days, such gifts were normally reserved for the fortunate few, the power elite, for royalty or important government officials. Nowadays we might identify such gratuitous gift-givers as Washington lobbyists trying to curry favors in exchange for token trinkets and treasures. But in this story the magi are not only portrayed as men of means, but also “wise” strangers, able to interpret events of astronomical importance. They’re not merely cunning conspirators to the treacherous Herod.

Why are they portrayed as “wise”? Well, we all know the learned seek illumination. *Veritas et lux* and all that. And this story tells us these wise and learned men find just such truth and enlightenment at the end of the rainbow; or, in this case, presumably directly under the brightest new star in the heavens. The appearance of a star – that is to say a light never before observed -- was taken as something of cosmic significance; at least for those who took notice of it.

So this new “epiphany,” which previously might have only represented the manifestation of the Jewish messiah to some, was meant to bestow enlightened wisdom to all, in the form of the visitation by the three foreigners.

Then conventional priorities are further upturned when such misdirected royal gifts are given in exchange for a little enlightenment; with a subversive transfer of allegiance from Rome to a one-horse town in Judea. On bended knee, these three unlikely characters get to behold “the light of the world,” or “light to the world.” But here’s the thing to remember about this extraordinary scene.

It’s a *selective* epiphany, with the choice for *all* to decide whether or not – in all our wisdom, fancy and folly – we care one whit about this new thing. Because there’s always the old world out there, with its trinkets and treasures, and old way of seeing the same old things.

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As far as Matthew is concerned, however, the message is this: In the least likely time and place wise men find the brightest illumination in some peasant offspring of seeming inconsequence. They greet this moment “with

joy.” And all the while, there remains the old ways of the world, lurking in the shadows, with a foreboding sense of treachery and fear.

That would be Herod and his concerns, that would drive him to the point of violent desperation. In what became quaintly known as the slaughter of the innocents, he’d eliminate all the newborn Jewish males within reach; as the “new light to the world,” tucked away under his mother’s arm, flees under cloak of darkness. In Matthew’s imagining it, they flee back across the border; from what had once been the old promised land, to await a new form of liberation, exodus and deliverance for those who might follow the new light.

With only a casual re-reading of this story, it may be difficult for us to understand and appreciate the dramatic juxtaposition of these two worlds at odds with each other; about the kind of subversive elements that come together in this story to dislodge and relocate what is heralded as a new king, a new kingdom, a new way of being and believing in this old world.

Still, we might ask just how much, or how little, has really changed. Just consider, when Herod’s own national security advisers, central intelligence agency and department of homeland security have to ask three foreigners who crossed over the Empire’s eastern border where the new kid on the royal block is setting up headquarters, it’s all about the principalities and powers of the old world, giving way to something that would seem, at first glance, so other-worldly. And it all begins with these stories, and the setting up of an intolerable tension from the beginning of Jesus’ life in a stable, to his demise on a bleak hill outside Jerusalem.

Certainly we know something of Jesus’ life, and what happens to him. But what about the three wise men? Matthew’s story tells us they returned to their homes, wherever that was, and we never hear from them again. They didn’t report back to Herod as requested, but took another route; suggesting something had changed for them, as a result of their enlightened encounter. They leave the stable

as changed persons, different than when they came; and certainly different than when they first set out from an unknown place for a place as yet unknown.

That’s why when Gaspar recently went missing from the family nativity set it got me wondering about this character, about his character; about how he was, in fact, changed as a result of his own *enlightenment*.

So I’ve done a little speculating and here’s my own apocryphal version of what happened to him. Read into it whatever you like, and believe it or not, just as I have.

But as for me, I can just hear old Gaspar, wherever he is, explaining his absence a little like this:

It’s like this: Balthazar had some royalty that ran in the family somewhere, so he was a king of sorts. A king without a kingdom, of course, but plenty of means. He’s the one who out did himself with that pot of gold.

And Melchior? He’s the dreamer, the romantic, the nice guy, the one who thinks everything is okay if it looks okay, if everyone acts okay, or even if things just smell okay. So he brought the frankincense.

But me? I knew where this was all headed from the start. Like the rest of us, Jesus had about him the glide angle of a dead duck. Only steeper.* So I brought the baby and his parents the myrrh, to at least try to give the guy a decent burial someday. Even if they escaped Herod’s clutches this time, I knew his days were numbered from the start.

Except ... except I do remember a glimmer of hope I shared with those other two stargazers when we first saw that bright new light in the western sky. It was enough at least to lead me on a bit, to join the others to see where it led.

It was as much out of curiosity really, mind you, as much as hope. I don’t hope easily or for much. Not anymore. To be honest, when it comes to things like hope, and faith, and such, I hold it on a pretty loose tether.

But still, Matthew the storyteller got it mostly right. When we found out where we’d been

led – and to whom we'd been led, and as curious as this may sound – we were strangely more overcome with joy than disbelief at the sight of it all. Because there was something there; and something more than just the relief at having finally had a long journey – or any long journey for that matter - - come to an end. It seemed as though it was something that couldn't be contained or confined by anything we'd seen before, or even imagined.

This was no ordinary new king, to be sure. And the odds of his kingdom really ever amounting to much, or holding sway against the power brokers of these rival nation states, would have been a fool's wager.

So I didn't show up once again this year among the cast of characters on your mantle, to simply stand and stare in mute adoration, awe or wonder. Some might say I went missing, and wonder how that came to be. Instead I'd say I simply went looking elsewhere, looking beyond what was once the "new dispensation." The manger leads to the cross. And without the cross, the manger -- or anything else for that matter -- doesn't have much of a chance.

When we left the manger the first time, little did we know the gifts we'd offered, even though they were the best we had to give, turned out to only be encumbrances for their impending flight into Egypt. But at least we got it right and were wise enough to listen to the warning in a dream not to report back to Herod; and instead took a different route home, in order to lose anyone tailing us.

But I'll tell you, when we got back home – back home to the old, familiar, safe world we'd left -- I just couldn't be content to spend my days looking for answers in the movements of constellations, or trying to interpret the meaning of life and death from the stars.

There was something so much more down to earth, real and tangible, about the kinds of things I'd come to hear about years later coming out of Galilee. Crazy stuff as disarming and irrepressible as it was subversive; about how you could always find something new rising up again and again out of something that seemed so real and right, but also dead and gone.

So I just didn't show up again this year, but took yet another path. The early followers of that light didn't need three wise guys to show up year after year in order to believe the good news. And neither do I.

Illusively yours,
Gaspar

* Acknowledged thanks to the writer Robert Capon for the descriptive dead duck phrase.

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