

“Other Countries/Other Roads”

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¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. (Matthew 2:1-12)

One Christmas Eve a few years ago, my friend Khaled went to Sam's Club. He was preparing for a big family dinner coming up, so he needed to buy in bulk. As he wheeled his very full cart up to the checkout lanes, he caught the eye of a cashier he had seen before. She recognized him, too. Even in a checkout line, Khaled makes an impression. She had just flipped off the light indicating that her lane was closing, but she motioned to him to come over anyway. "I know you," she said. "I can take you here."

I should say here at the outset that Khaled is a faithful Muslim. He follows the path of Sufism, a spiritual discipline within Islam that seeks the cleansing and reparation of the heart. He looks for light and peace in all people, even those who are different from him, even those he might meet in the checkout lane at Sam's Club.

And on this night in this checkout lane, Khaled happily accepted the invitation he had been given. As he began to unload his cart, he remembered from a prior conversation that this woman was a Christian. [Khaled's conversations get deep pretty fast.] So he knew it was an especially significant evening in her faith tradition. He knew she was probably watching the clock for when she would be able to go home, get ready for the Christmas Eve service, and begin the celebration of her savior's birth. In his mind, there was only one question to ask. "So, how is it with you and the King?"

A huge smile immediately spread across the clerk's face. "It's his birthday!" she said happily. And then she paused, and the smile weakened a bit. "But I'm disappointed," she continued, "because my mother is ill. I have to stay with her tonight, so I can't go to church."

Khaled thought just a moment, and then responded, "If you were to ask Jesus, 'Would you rather me go to church, or to stay with my sick mother?,' I bet Jesus would say,



'Be with your mother.'" The cashier threw her arms around him and gave him a big hug. The full smile was back on her face, and Christmas had arrived at Sam's Club. It was brought there by a Muslim, a wise man from the East who seeks peace, loves people and respects Jesus.

The same is true of these strange men from the East in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew's story of Christmas does not include the details of Luke about a manger, shepherds, or multitudes of angels lighting up the countryside with joyful songs. By contrast, Matthew's version is darker, stranger, and tinged with threat and fear. This dark cloud pursues these wise men from the East, who pop up in the story seemingly out of nowhere and then disappear just as quickly. Like their names and country of origin, their faith tradition is alien and unknown, yet they are heralded by the gospel as true ambassadors of Christmas, God-fearing people who offered gifts, homage, and reverence to the child known as Emmanuel, "God with us."

We might ask, who are these guys who pop up out of nowhere in the gospel story and then disappear from it just as quickly? We want to know more, which is probably why, across the centuries, the Christian church has tried to fill in some of the blanks with details that explain them better. There were three of them, tradition says. They must have been powerful kings, perhaps from Asia. And they had camels. It makes for a lovely tableau, but the story itself gives no details like these. Actually, I think that the lack of detail is part of the point. I think the mystery about these scholars from the East is intentional, because we have no choice but to focus on the only things we know for sure from the story:

- that these guys traveled a long way to meet Jesus;
- that a mysterious star in the heavens guided them;
- that, when they arrived at the place where the child was with Mary his mother, they were overwhelmed with joy, knelt down, and paid him homage;
- and that, because they sensed that Herod dangerous and could not be trusted, they went home by another road.

It is interesting that the New Testament does this fairly often. A Syrophenician woman presses Jesus to heal her daughter. The apostle Peter meets a Roman centurion named Cornelius, who had been instructed by an angel in a dream to seek Peter out. A eunuch from Ethiopia seeks baptism from the evangelist Philip. All of these characters pop up out of nowhere and disappear quickly, with little detail around who they were. But all of them push the narrative to envision God in bigger ways. In short, they are all teachers from unlikely places.

This is the way I have come to see Khaled, who lives just outside of Minneapolis. He holds to a different faith tradition, but he has much to say about faith that resonates with many others. In the story of the wise men, Herod was of the same faith tradition as Mary and Joseph, but he was actively working against the movement of God in the world. It was the unnamed foreigners who modeled true faith in this story. They are the pattern for discipleship that shows what it means to be called, to follow, and to live with kindness, respect, and reverence. In the same way, Khaled's life serves as a model for all who know him – to everyone who experiences his warmth, his openness, and his concern for all people. And the lessons I have learned from him have also proven the wisdom of those leaders in the church who, 57 years ago, wrote and advocated passage of *The Confession of 1967*. The primary focus of that confessional statement was reconciliation – the power and

purpose of God to overcome division and bring all people together. This goal pushes and prompts us to be open-minded when it comes to other faith traditions. “Christians find parallels between other religions and their own and must approach all religions with openness and respect,” the confession states. “Repeatedly God has used the insight of non-Christians to challenge the church to renewal.”¹

This calling reminds me of something that Jesus himself said in the gospel of John. In Chapter 10, Christ identifies himself as both “the good shepherd” as well as the gate by which all sheep enter the kingdom of God. He is the way in to the fold. Over the centuries, this passage has been used by some to deny the validity of other religions, as if Jesus is somehow saying that every other religion is ultimately doomed to failure. But those interpretations, in my opinion, overlook something mysterious that Jesus says next. “*I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,*” Jesus says, and “*I must bring them also.*”² Like mysterious characters who pop up in the story, this statement by Jesus seems to suggest that, if we think others do not belong to God – if we think that our religion has cornered the market on righteousness – we need to be careful. If we are too quick to close people out, we may be acting more like Herod than wise men. After all, as Presbyterians, we believe strongly in the unconditional sovereignty of God. So, mustn’t we at least be open to the possibility that God is powerful enough, gracious enough, and loving enough to save people who have never even heard the name Jesus Christ? I think we would have to say yes, God is big enough and powerful enough to do that.

Even so, this story of wise men from the East does follow the pattern that, in all of these cases where people who come from other countries, who follow other roads, are drawn to the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is always in the conversation. How Christ works beyond the scope of our familiar patterns remains a mystery, but he has said pointedly that he has other sheep out there who are being drawn in to the love and light of God. As followers of Christ, ours is not to fence others out, but to welcome them in, trusting that the eternal power of God will find a way to work out the details that so often derail our attempts at reconciliation. That holy power to bring people together is a key part of the good news of the babe in the manger.

On a Christmas Eve not so long ago, a woman in Sam’s Club was struggling – struggling with worry about her mother, struggling with the expectations of her church, her faith, and her own conscience. It may have been the holiest night of the year, but she was still confused. And then a wise man from the East cut through the haze in her spirit with a simple question, which ended up being the only question she needed to think about that night. Perhaps, on this Epiphany Sunday, it is an important question for you – a question posed by wise men from afar, people from other countries who take other roads.

“How is it with you and the King?”

Amen.

¹ *The Confession of 1967*, Inclusive language version. <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/resource/inclusive-language-version-confession-1967/>

² John 10:16.