

## Settle? or Seek? The Invitation for Each One's Entire Life

Matthew 2:1-12  
Ted V. Foote, Jr.

January 08, 2017  
First Presbyterian Church, Bryan, Texas

Most of my life, I've thought about the story of the Magi in one of two ways. (1) I've thought about this story concentrating on sophisticated foreigners traveling 600 miles and bearing gifts to honor the infant Jesus. Whether they are called "wise men," or Magi, they are sophisticated foreigners; and (2) I've thought about how, following their example, I should offer gifts to Jesus Christ through my own life. Poet Christina Rossetti, writing in 1872, captured the essence of both of these focus points in the fourth stanza of her lyrics, entitled, "In the Bleak Midwinter" – "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can, I give him: give my heart."

If focusing on either or both (1) of the sophisticated foreigners traveling long and presenting gifts to the infant Jesus, and (2) of us all attempting to follow their example through our own lives – (if either or both of those) are enough for you – then that's part of your journey "where you are," as it's been part of mine. I'm not attempting to coerce you into a different angle of interpretation or understanding. I want to tell you this morning how my own understanding has been slightly altered from what I've thought before.

Last year, someone suggested to me a book, which I likely would never have known about, because at this stage in my life, I mostly do not read detective fiction. The book, published 25 years ago, is Robert Paul's "Whatever Happened to Sherlock Holmes? Detective Fiction, Popular Theology, and Society." Dr. Paul was an English church historian, who, in the second half of the twentieth century, spent time teaching in Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Texas. At some point in his life, he became interested in detective fiction. His 1991 book explores similarities in the thinking and logic of detective storytellers and Biblical storytellers and theologians. I'm no expert in this, but it helps me to create a triangle-drawing of part of Dr. Paul's emphasis. In the triangle, one point is "the ordered" and its opposite point is "the chaotic." Dr. Paul is convinced that detective stories hinge around chaos occurring in such a way that order is disrupted or broken, through a murder or other serious crime. The detective's role is assessing the occurrence of chaos and working to solve the mystery of disrupted or broken order, or, phrased differently – working to restore order. Dr. Paul wrote this book convinced that every mystery's author portrays the detective as a person and a professional who works and insists on "detection by reason" (pgs.8-9,12). This is the third point of this triangle: "the ordered," "the chaotic," and (what philosophers call) "the epistemological." Epistemology is a "\$6.00 word" which essentially means "the branch of philosophy studying the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge or belief which can be justified." Epistemology understands that such knowledge or belief is clearly different from "opinion." Dr. Paul believes that detective stories move from order broken by chaos to restoration based on studied evidence. Crimes are solved because detectives work from clues to evidence based on scientific methods, questions, research, data, etc. Crimes are not solved, and order is not re-established by opinions, but by inquiry, evidence, and deductive and inductive reasoning which lead to findings of fact.

What does this have to do with the Magi, the Wise Researchers, the Scholarly and Spiritual Travelers? In a way, isn't this what creates our identification with them from ages past? Wasn't it their passion for "the Holy" which exceeded their particular bounds of geography, ethnicity, national origin, education, and status – what prompted their research and their decision to travel beyond those bounds with the gifts they offered to the child Jesus? Isn't their willingness to leave the order of the familiar wherever they lived and to venture toward the unfamiliar and even into the chaotic – through King Herod's court – isn't their willingness to leave the order of the familiar and to venture toward the unfamiliar and even the chaotic what led to the step-by-step and day-by-day 600 mile journey to Bethlehem and the 600 or more mile journey back to their homes by another way? I think we can "boil this down" to the question: Settle? or Seek? Do wise men so settle into their routines and personal sense of narrow values that they resist completely the pleading of God to seek beyond the routine? Or, in spite of their satisfaction with being settled, do they read and observe carefully, converse intently with one another, pack their travel bags, saddle up and mount up with their gifts for the child recently born, whom they hope to locate and visit? Do they settle? or seek?

Around 1990, Christ Episcopal Church, in Tyler, Texas, advertised on regional television, with the pastor saying, "If you visit Christ Church for worship, we will never ask you to leave your brain at the door."

Living 35 miles away, in that area of Texas, I was impressed enough with their advertisement that I remember it to this day. Last week, I googled that church's website to see if they were still using that slogan. So far as I could tell, after 25 years the pastor now is different, and the slogan is not used on their website. What's more, I discovered a blog site from December, 2013, by an Episcopal priest in another state. He posted an article asking churches to refrain from using the phrase, "The Episcopal Church never asks you to leave your brain at the door," because that priest believes such a sentence is a put-down to persons who might sense the church is requiring rational thinking and deliberate reasoning to be part of each member's faith-formation priorities. His concluding sentence, very gently expressed, states: "I pray that we'll be careful talking about checking brains at the door, lest people just think we've decided to check our hearts instead." [Rev. Robert Hendrickson] This argument among Episcopalians is an argument Catholics, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, and others have also had, and continue to have: Does a "heart-faith" trump a "thinking/reasoning faith"? Does my opinion shaped by non-questioning or by settled answers overrule a seeking faith which utilizes careful thought, doubt, and reasoning, and which "seeking faith" may change across the years?

The story we read today from Matthew's presentation of the Gospel gives not one syllable of support to such a divided argument. The Magi, or Scholars, or Sages were foreigners visiting Bethlehem in Judah. They were characters representing, yes, the prophecy of Isaiah 60:4-7, that visitors from far countries would personally recognize and honor God's Blessed One; AND they were characters who would never have started their journey, nor would they have survived their journey unless they had been persons shaped by both their brains and their hearts, unless they had been persons of careful study, reasoned thought, and a willingness to trust the leadership which they deduced God's Spirit was offering them. They did not leave either their hearts or their brains, either their faith or their reasoning at the door of this challenge to their lives. They brought both. They utilized both. Every step and moment of the way.

In 1904, Henry van Dyke wrote "The Story of the Other Wise Man." Mr. van Dyke purposes that there was a fourth Magi named Artaban, who was a partner with the other three of legend. (Matthew never mentions names or how many.) Artaban, however, did not make the rendezvous point with his three colleagues on time because, on his way to meet them, he paused to share his meager supplies with a man who had collapsed in the desert. They departed before he arrived. Disappointed but not deterred, Artaban sold the sapphire which he planned to give to the Babe of Bethlehem, so that he would have supplies for the journey. By the time he arrived in Bethlehem, not only had his colleagues gone home by another way, Joseph and Mary had also fled to Egypt, in case King Herod reacted violently. Artaban never found Jesus as a child. He gave away the ruby which he planned to give young Jesus in order to save the life of another Bethlehem child from Roman soldiers. Just over 30 years later, still searching, he ransomed a slave-girl at the price of the great pearl which was the third of his planned gift of 3 jewels to Jesus as a child. Artaban never arrived at Bethlehem while infant Jesus was there. Yet Mr. van Dyke's story is one of Artaban's seeking and serving, and never settling. Never settling with his mind or his heart. Always seeking with science and with spirit, with careful thought and with constant compassion. Henry van Dyke was a Presbyterian Christian. From 1885 to 1925, he was caught up in church debates where some insisted that "settling" in the church's theology was always preferred to "seeking." Van Dyke never bought that argument. He argued back: God gave us minds and consciences, brains and emotions. Use those well serving God's people; and do it all the time." (In 1907, Henry van Dyke also wrote the words to this morning's closing hymn, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" – "...drive the dark of doubt away. Fill us with the light of day. Ever singing, march we onward...")

You don't have to be Sherlock Holmes or Jessica Fletcher, Frank Columbo or Rizzoli and Isles, Ben Matlock or Olivia Benson to solve life's mysteries. The fictional "other wise man" (Artaban) is a good model for all. Don't settle in your life and faith and relationships, but seek – with intelligence, compassion, reason, and love – (seek) the One who places you in a worldwide community with all sorts of people, every one of whom is your sister or brother in God's family. Seek and serve Jesus Christ, who is born in poverty, becomes a refugee in the next country over, teaches and heals in ways that frustrate and anger those who want religion and politics to be settled, and who is killed by religious and political "settlers," only to be alive beyond death in the spirit of the One who started this whole thing: seeking both our seeking and our serving – yours and mine and others – with heart and mind and gifts, our entire life through. – All honor and praise be to God.