

“Use Your Imagination”
by Ellen Williams Hensle | January 5, 2025

Even if you haven't spent much time in church, you probably have a mental picture of this story. Three wise men – or is it three kings? – traveling across the desert to visit the baby Jesus at the manger in Bethlehem. They each carry a gift on the back of their camels – one bringing an object made of gold, the other two with ornate containers holding fragrant substances we're familiar with in name only, frankincense and myrrh. Can you see the three men, in their long drapery robes and turbans – or does your mind's eye see crowns? Do you imagine them silhouetted against the starry sky, or bowing down before Jesus in the silent night of the stable? Either way, you probably have a sense of this story from Christmas pageants and greeting cards and collective memory.

It turns out that much of what first comes to mind when we picture this story may not be based in fact. Let's start with the number three. Nowhere in the narrative does Matthew say that there were three visitors. The best we can tell, the idea that there were three magi comes from the three gifts that Matthew credits them with bringing. Three gifts, three visitors. But nothing in the text says that there have to be three. In fact, it's probably more likely that they came with a caravan including the servants and supplies they would need for a journey that could have lasted as long as several months.

And who were these visitors, exactly? Very likely not kings. The Greek word Matthew uses to refer to them is *magoi* – the root of our English word for magic. Some scholars think these magi were Persian; others think that an origin in Babylon is more likely. Certainly they read the stars for signs and were skilled in dream interpretation. And certainly they were wealthy enough to bring lavish gifts fit for the young Jesus, the one whom their analysis of signs in the heavens led them to seek out as the ascendant “king of the Jews.” Other than that, we're not exactly sure who they were. Perhaps they were priests, philosophers, religious advisors, courtiers, intellectuals, or some combination of all those things.

The idea that they were kings seems to come from later readers drawing a connection between Matthew's narrative and the Isaiah passage Buddy read for us: the prophecy that rulers from other nations will someday be filled with reverence for God and bring the wealth of their kingdoms as an offering to the Lord. The magi coming to Jesus with gifts of gold and frankincense came to be understood as the fulfillment of this prophecy, and so it follows that they must have been kings, as Isaiah foretold.

The New Revised Standard translation of the Bible we read every Sunday refers to the visitors as “wise men,” and while this is a better translation of *magoi*, that Greek term, “wise men” isn't entirely accurate either. For one thing, the people of Jerusalem probably did not see these foreign visitors as wise. The Old Testament Scriptures forbid divination and augury, so Jesus's fellow Jews in Jerusalem would probably have viewed the visiting astrologers as suspicious, perhaps even foolish.

Modern scholars have also pointed out that nothing in Matthew's text requires us to believe all the visitors were men. Though the Greek noun *magoi* is masculine plural, collective nouns in Greek become masculine on the inclusion of one man, as is true in many languages. Even in a group of 99 women, as soon as one man enters, the noun becomes masculine. So the noun *magoi* leaves room for us to imagine a group of mixed gender. After all, in the ancient world, wisdom was closely associated with the feminine, as in the character of Woman Wisdom found in the Biblical book of Proverbs.

And believe it or not, I'm not even done myth-busting around this story. Well, actually, for the moment I *am* done – my husband Tom suggested I tell you that there's not enough time to get to every possible misconception in this one sermon. The point is, I could go on if I wanted.

But ultimately, this story is shrouded in mystery. These unnamed, unnumbered visitors ride into Bethlehem – wait, the camels aren't in Matthew either! These unnamed, unnumbered visitors *appear* from the East for a few verses and then return home by another road. There's much we don't know about them – much we *can't* know about them, probably never *will* know about them. And so our imaginations get to work filling in the rest. We imagine how many magi there were and picture them riding in on camels. In some Christian traditions, the magi were given names, ages, races, whole backstories. Even their gifts became identified with specific symbolic meanings, as in the hymn “We Three Kings.” All these things are the work of our collective imaginations filling in the gaps of this story.

That is by no means a bad thing. There is so much in the Bible that requires us to employ our holy imaginations. For example, those of us who want to know more about the women of the Bible have to use our holy imaginations to give names, faces, and fuller lives to characters that are underrepresented in texts written in a patriarchal culture. Even Jesus, the

most represented character in the Biblical story, gives us opportunities to use our holy imagination. What was he doing for all those years between being born and showing up in the temple at age 12? Or between 12 and going to be baptized around age 30? Which, by the way, our sense of Jesus's age is also a product of reading between the lines of the gospels and using our holy imaginations.

In any event, the Biblical text gives us so many opportunities to exercise this holy imagination, to take what we can read and what we know from good scholarship and to let the Holy Spirit draw us into the creative enterprise of filling in the gaps, of connecting our story to God's story. And using our holy imaginations to read the Bible is good practice for the rest of our lives, because the work of faithful living requires us to use our holy imaginations on a daily basis.

What can we imagine? The so-called "Christian Imagination" has been the topic of much conversation in the church and the theological academy in the last decade or so, following the publication of a book with that title by the biblical scholar and theologian Willie James Jennings. In the book, Jennings argues that Western Christians have a "diseased social imagination." He demonstrates that the Christianity that came to the New World with white Europeans was a Christianity of domination – domination both of other people and the land.

Whether we like it or not, that history permeates our belief and practice of Christianity, cutting us off from God's beloved children of other denominations, races and traditions, and limiting our capacity to imagine a world different from the one we live in. But this isn't what God desires for us. Jennings invites us to open wide our imaginations, to dream with God about a world where we are more connected, more aware of the consequences of our beliefs and the sufferings of others, more willing to think outside the box for the sake of the kingdom of God – and then to let the Holy Spirit spur us into loving action.

We could start with the magi as an example of using our holy imaginations. Whoever they were, wherever they came from and in whatever configuration, they were open to signs in the stars that would lead them on a journey of hundreds of miles to greet the king of a country and religion not their own. They came to the capital of his country, expecting to find the newborn king there, and were open to the suggestion that he would be found not in a palace but in a humble home in a small town instead.

When they finally arrived at Jesus's dwelling place, they "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy," and knelt down before him, Matthew tells us – they were in awe of the holy child and offered him not only their costly gifts, but their reverence. And when it was time for them to return home, they were open to the possibility that the best course of action would be to leave the country secretly, disobeying the orders of a king known for his cruelty.

The magi displayed remarkable openness, remarkable courage, remarkable imagination. They were willing to let the Spirit, as they understood and experienced it, move them beyond the comforts of home to encounter the wonder of God's glory revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate Christ's glory this Epiphany, I wonder where God's Spirit might move us, if we open wide our imaginations. What dreams do you have for this church? For our community? For our nation and our world? God is calling us, inviting us, to use the minds we have been given to imagine, along with God, a world with more connection, more wonder, where more people have what they need to flourish in mind, body and soul.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he says later in the Gospel of Matthew that to enter the kingdom of heaven, we have to become like little children. Children are busy using their imaginations all the time. Earlier this week my son asked me to tell him a story in which he traveled with Spidey and His Amazing Friends to visit baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Silly? Sure. But on the other hand, Albert thought it would be worth the trip to see Jesus, and he wanted to make sure his friends were along for the ride.

So make like a three and a half year old and use your holy imagination. It's a gift, and a call, and maybe our best hope for the future.