

## OUT OF THE EAST Matthew 2:1-12

Of all the Christmas characters, the Wise Men are my favorite, for they are shrouded in mystery. So little is really known about them. Then, just as mysteriously, they disappeared back into the desert sands, their adventures only eluded to, in other texts of the Orthodox tradition.

It is said that there were three of them, but that is only because there were three gifts. It was quite common in those days, to travel in larger groups for safety. It is possible that in fact, it was closer to a dozen or more. And when one includes servants, slaves, and supplies required for such a long trip, the caravan would have been large, and moved at a speed only camels can appreciate.

It is said that they came from the East. But where in the East? Legend has it that one came from Persia, one from India, and one from North Africa; that the colors of their skin were different. They are thought to have met somewhere along the journey, and began to travel together. But who is to know for sure?

It is said that they were wise. We assume that they were learned men, knowledgeable in languages, mathematics,

and of course, the workings of the stars. Other translations use the word 'kings'. Were these men in fact, members of their respective royal families? It is unlikely that the crowned 'king' or heir would be allowed to travel such distances away from their people and their responsibilities. Other more obscure texts suggest that in fact, one or more of these men were merchants, familiar with trade routes, the value of spices, and comfortable with long distance travel by camel.

More mystery than fact. But what is known is this. Strangers from strange lands saw something that made them curious. If they were astronomers, they looked for a mathematical solution to the anomaly in the sky. If they were adventurers, they looked for excitement to cure the boredom of dull lives. They likely travelled along trade routes, for these were known paths from one region to the next, with assured water for the camels, and the occasional town to restock supplies.

The trip was long. By day it was filled with hours of hot sun and poisonous snakes. By night the danger came on two legs, as bandits too, roamed the trade routes in search of easy wealth. Danger lay on all sides. Each night over the fire, stories from their own lands were told, perhaps in their

own language. Songs were sung. Food shared. Interesting people were met along the way: nomads moving from their summer to winter homes; other traders with tales of even more remote cities of grandeur; the odd person here and there, trying to disappear from the world, or make a new start in life. Wealthy people. Humble people. Desperate people. Shifty-eyed people. All this and more would have been encountered along the way.

As they moved closer to the west, they began to hear a wild tale: of a ancient prophet's promise, of a Holy Child, and now, whispers that the child might be in danger. Soon after being presented to the court of King Herod as guests of the city, it became clear where the danger lay. But what a few gold coins in the marketplace also bought them, was information. Yes, the strange tale of the Holy Child was true. Yes, the family was still in the region, in a little town up the road called Bethlehem. And so it was to Bethlehem.

The stable had long since returned to its normal purpose. The baby was now a toddler, beginning to stand on his own legs, explore the small hut called home, bang on pots and pans with a wooden spoon while supper was being prepared. Mary looked up to find three well-

dressed men in her doorway. The men were stopped in the tracks by this humble family scene. This was the Holy Child? This was the one who would save the world?

An in an instant, I think they knew the answer. Yes. This child would do all that and more. For all that had brought them to this place, the wise men had come to know a great deal about people: the good ones, and the bad. They had deepened their understanding of things like character, integrity, humility. But they also understood ambition, jealousy, anger, greed. The wise men fell to their knees, overwhelmed by the modesty of this simple family, and a quiet understanding within them, that they were in the presence of the most Holy. They presented gifts, well beyond Mary's imagining. Expensive gifts. Gold.

But beyond this moment, the wise men knew: this family would need help. Here, now, these men knew, they could help. They had the connections, the influence, the gold. So I leave with you, "Did they help?"

The wise men had travelled hundreds of miles: from different countries, speaking different languages, sharing different cultures, following different religious practices. Understanding some but not all of each other, setting aside differences so that together, they might learn the meaning of a star. Together, they fell to their knees, as one, in their respect of the Holy Child, from yet, another faith and a culture and language they did not understand. So I leave with you, "Can we in this world, live together?"

On the journey over the desert, the wise men ate around a fire with wealthy spice merchants, humble shepherds, and probably a thief or two. Each day was filled with a sense of wonder, and interest of other people: their stories, their worries, their dreams. How much richer were the hearts of the wise men at the end of their journey, because of these conversations. So I leave with you, "Are you willing to learn something new, about yourself, or someone else?"

May you strive to be a wise man or woman of the world. Share what you can. Help when you see a need. Tell stories. Eat together. Be curious. Keep room for the mystery of life to surprise you. Amen.