

Being Seen

^{NRS} Mat 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They 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.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Part of what makes life interesting is that each of us sees the world around us slightly differently. Our experience, our age, our gender- all of this colors how we see the world and interpret it.

Will and Ella remind me of this nearly every day. One of the fun things about having kids is how quickly they go through different stages. Every few months they're able to do something they weren't able to do before. They learn so much so fast- it's incredible to watch. For a few weeks now Will has been playing this funny game with me- a game lots of kids play. Often Melis will wake him up before she heads off for work and will get breakfast started. And then I'll come down the stairs to feed the dog and get the paper and do the rest of the morning routine. For the last couple of weeks if Will is in the right mood, I'll hear this sing songy voice say, "Daddy, come try to find me." And he says it like he's found the most amazing hiding place in the world. Like

he's created a hole in the space/time continuum and he's found a void in which I'll never be able to find him. But no, when I peek around the corner, there he is just sitting there in his seat in his PJ's. And he's sitting there with his arm over his face covering his eyes in the classic you-you-can't-see-me if-I-can't-see position.

Now in another month or so, I know that he'll figure out that we really can see him even when he's covering his eyes. But for now it's just down right fun to play along and say, "I don't know? I see PJ's...I see William's hair...but I don't see William!" It's fun to play this game, and it works because he really believes if he can't see me, then I can't see him. It works because we see the world a little bit differently.

The magi knew all about seeing the world differently, didn't they? The text this morning is all about seeing. Before the story even begins Matthew assumes the magi have already been doing a great deal of looking- searching up into the night sky and comparing star charts and prophecy. And then it happens- wham! A star blazes into the night sky. Though astronomers from the time of Kepler have been trying to figure out what astral event the magi might possibly have been observing, it's still unclear exactly what they were looking at. But that they were looking, looking at a bright light- the story is confident about this. And so, having it in their sights they take off together, traveling through wasteland and wilderness- all the while continuing to follow their eyes fixed on that star.

And they follow it all the way to Israel. Believing it portends the birth of king, naturally they hit the palace in Jerusalem first. But of course there's no baby there. Just a frightened old man with a crown and a paranoia the size of Wyoming. So they look to

the star again and they follow it to the tiny city of Bethlehem. And there they've got quite a search on their hands, going from house to house, peering into each one. Until at last they come to it. They come to the place where people told them a woman, a stranger had given birth. And they step inside, and they see with their own eyes the Christ child.

So much looking, so much seeing. And we get so excited about these seekers, these magi. We get so focused on them. It doesn't help that Matthew tells us so little. That only makes us more curious. For instance Matthew doesn't tell us how many of them there are. He just says *magoi*, which is plural. He never says three. We just infer that from there being three gifts- but the truth is we really don't know. We just want detail. Same is true with their names- Balthasaar, Melchior, and Caspar. We have no idea about this- Matthew doesn't tell us this, the church just made it up in the 8th century. If you were born into the Eastern wing of the church we'd know them as Hor, Karsudan, and Basenater, and if we were Syrian or Armenian we'd know them by other names as well. And we focus on them so much we even get frustrated by these magi. There's an old joke that declares it's obvious they were wise men and not women. If they were women they would have stopped and asked for directions, they would have shown up on time for the birth, they would have cleaned the stable, and they wouldn't have brought those stupid gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but a casserole, diapers, and would have sent Mary to the spa for an hour.

We get so focused on these magi and on their journey; we forget that they aren't really the point of the whole story. The point is really the seeing, it's about them seeing

that little one cradled in a manger. And, and I think most of all, it's about *him* seeing *them*. Yeah, the most interesting thing of all about this story is how they allow themselves to be seen by him.

The most fascinating things about this text is what happens when the wise men enter the room. Not only are they filled with incredible joy- the Greek text just piles superlative after superlative telling us their joy is so intense as to be indescribable. But what they do is so amazing. Nearly every translation that you'll find will say that they enter into the room and worship the child- and the word here is *proskuneo*, which can mean to worship. But most literally what *proskuneo* means is to kneel down before someone.

The first thing those magi do, before anything else, before they whip out those bizarre gifts, is they get down onto the same level with that little one, they kneel down- they *proscueno*. And they don't have to do this. They could see him just fine when they entered- they could see him from across the room. But babies, babies don't see that well. In the first three months they can only see about 7 to 15 inches in front of them. Except for blue, they can see colors, but they can't distinguish between tones like red and orange. And since their eyes are working together just yet, they can't follow motion very well. So those magi, those apparently rich and powerful guys, they don't come in and start throwing gifts around- no, they come in kneel down. They allow themselves to be seen. They come in and they go to the one place they've been longing to be for so long- right in front of the little one's face, in full view of God's gaze.

And this, this is where they amaze me. Way more amazing than going on a journey or finding some star in the sky and linking it to some moldy old prophecy, what

blows me away about these magi is that they allow themselves to be seen by God- to be truly and thoroughly seen.

We don't like to be seen very much. We tint our car windows. We wear our sunglasses when it's raining. Honestly, I saw a car on Friday when it was pouring and the head lights were on and the driver was wearing shades. And technology- technology has only helped us disguise ourselves more easily. We can now communicate with literally millions of other people all while hiding behind a pseudonym or an avatar with giant blue hair and rippling muscles. We like to see- but we don't like to be seen. As silly as it sounds we're not all that different from Will- we like to pretend that if we hide our eyes or our names, we seem to think that maybe we really can't be seen- by others; by God.

But the magi aren't like this, are they? No, they go right into that room, and they kneel down right before the Christ child. And they allow him to study their faces with those serious, searching eyes that babies have- unimpressed with status or anything but whether they find love in the face at which they are gazing. And even though the first meaning of proscuneo is to kneel down- I love that it comes to mean worship. Because this really is what worship, true worship, is all about, isn't it? True worship isn't a funny sermon or a great piece of music or being entertained. True worship is entering into God's presence and allowing ourselves to be seen. And this isn't for God- God already sees us, already knows us. No, it's for us. It's important for us once a week or as often as we're able, to come together and place ourselves fully and consciously before the face of the Christ child and allow ourselves to be seen for all that we are, the good, the not so

good, and through it all to feel God's face shining upon us telling us without words that we are beloved, beautiful, and blessed. More than almost anything else in our lives we need this- we need to be blessed. We hunger for it

I'd like to end this morning in a different way. One of the masters in the church's spiritual tradition was Ignatius Loyola founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius taught the church how to pray using our imagination- he invited us not just to hear a text read or hear a sermon on it, but to close our eyes and actually imagine ourselves within it. So, in a moment I'm going to invite us all to close our eyes, and I will lead us in a brief Ignatian exploration of this moment between Jesus and the magi. Let us begin:

Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Relax your body and rest in God's grace. You are safe here. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, simply open your eyes and look to the table, the font, the cross, or look out one of the windows at God's creation.

Now imagine yourself as one of the magi standing just outside the stable in which Mary has delivered the Holy child. What do you see? What does the stable look like? What time is it- is it day or night? What are you hearing? And look down at yourself. How are you dressed? What does your body feel like- are you tired from the journey? Are you excited to enter?

Now it's time to enter the stable. As you pass through the door what is the first thing you see? Is it dark here? Is there light? Where is it coming from? Look around the stable- what animals do you see? Is there hay or feed? What does it smell like? Now notice Mary and Joseph. Where are they in the stable? Are they sitting, or lying down?

Are they together or apart? Look at their faces- what are they feeling? Do you see peace? Joy? Fear? Exhaustion?

Now look for the manger. Normally it's used for feeding the animals- now it holds a baby. How big is it? How is it made? What is the color of the wood? Can you see the little one inside?

Now come closer. Kneel down. Put your face close to the child's face, to Jesus' face. Imagine that he's awake. Feel his eyes look at you- see you. What color are his eyes? How long are his eye lashes? And now imagine him smiling- smiling at you. Somehow knowing exactly who you are- knowing everything you've ever done, ever thought, ever said. He sees it all. And he's smiling at you, blessing you, blessing every part of you. Allow Christ's grace to come upon you, to enter you. Allow yourself to be seen, and to be loved.

And now filled with Christ's grace, begin to bring your awareness back to where you sit. And as you bring your awareness back, let us end with the words of the Psalmist. Let us: "Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD!" Let the light of your face shine upon us. You have put gladness in my heart more than when grain and wine abound. When I lie down and sleep I will do so in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety. Let the light of your face shine upon us, O LORD! And may our faces reflect your grace all we meet this day and this week. **Amen.**