

LET US GO NOW AND SEE
Second Sunday after Christmas
January 5, 2025

They were pagan travelers coming from the east to Jerusalem, bearing gifts for a newborn king. Their number is not known. Although tradition says there were three of them. Their profession was highly regarded in some cultures, while in others they were greatly maligned. Five hundred years later a Latin document assigned names to them; Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

Who were the men in this Gospel story? What was their profession? Where did they come from? And what was the significance of their arrival in Jerusalem? Every Christmas season we sing of, “We three kings,” and of wisemen. We speak of them as very learned, wealthy men who were highly respected in their society. Maybe they were kings bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What is fact or maybe legend, or possibly myth? We don’t know for certain.

But what we do know, is that this story tells us many important things about God’s Gospel; God’s good news of love and acceptance and grace for all of humanity. It is a story of inclusivity and love and the breaking down of barriers and seeing the stranger not as some reviled bizarre oddity, but as a human being much like us. Someone who is not a stranger, but is indeed one of us.

These foreign travelers from the east were most likely not kings. They were not Magi in the sense of wisemen. Others who have plied their trade, have been charlatans and thieves and swindlers.

Author Harvey Cox speaks of these men:

when the Christmas season approaches each year and we see the trio of gift-bearing rajahs clustered around the holy family in front yards and public squares or hear “We Three Kings” chiming incessantly over department-store loudspeakers, one piece of such ancient history might prove disconcerting to some. The ‘Magi’ mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel were not kings. They were probably not even wise men. They were more like astrologers [or sorcerers] or the palmists who hang signs that say ‘Readings’ outside their doors in certain parts of American cities.

The historians who study the social practices of imperial Rome...have found that astrology at the time was a highly disputed art. In some cultures, such as in that of ancient Persia, diviners were accorded great deference; rulers depended on them for advice. In the Greco-Roman world, many intellectuals lampooned their pretensions.”

In our day these men might have been Tarot Cards readers, or people who develop horoscopes based on an alignment of the stars, or those who read people’s palms or throw bones on the ground and read their alignment. Many ancient rulers relied on these kinds of prognostications before deciding whether to go out to war against an enemy. In some cultures, these prognosticators were well-to-do and highly respected.

The story of these Magi seeking after the newborn Jewish king was a story that would have disturbed many individuals in Jerusalem that day. And it was a tale that would have been shocking as it was repeated again, and again among the early JEWISH Christian communities. Even in our day, this story, that tells of the reach of God’s limitless love, can disturb us as we see all the people, many on the margins of society, who have found their way

within God's love and grace. Is Harper one of these that could be within the reach of God's love? Let me take a moment to tell you, her story. It might make you a little uncomfortable, while, at the same time, deeply touch your heart.

The other night Desiree and I watched a Netflix documentary called "Will and Harper." Will, is Will Farrell. Full disclosure. There are only one or two Will Farrell movies that I can stand. But this documentary he produced is at the top of my list. The Northern Express website says that this film is: "The most interesting and heartfelt 'buddy film' of the year, [and one that is] also a true story. In Netflix's *Will & Harper*, we find an intimate and vulnerable documentary about a longtime relationship that also becomes an intentional allegory for America's reckoning with transgender understanding." Northern Express goes on to tell us about the film:

"[it] is an emotional roller coaster as filmmaker Josh Greenbaum and his small crew follow famed actor Will Ferrell on a road trip across the country with his friend Harper Steele.

Will and Harper met 30 years ago on the set of Saturday Night Live. Ferrell was just a budding new cast member, and Steele was one of the show's talented writers. Ferrell was young and nervous, Steele saw his talent. Together they bonded over absurd jokes, bizarre sketch ideas, and a shared sensibility of pushing comedy to its limits.

In the beginning, Steele is living and identifying as male and married to a woman with whom he has two children. Known by performers as a genius writer of sketch comedy, Steele has a successful life on the outside. But on the inside, Steele has been reckoning with suffering and confusion, and over the course of many difficult years, begins the process of self-acceptance and self-acknowledgement. The source of that pain

has been a lifelong attempt to conform her gender to society, even though Steele has always known who she is.

So in 2021, after years of hiding in the masculine as assigned by birth, Steele sends a series of letters to close friends. They explain for the first time what she has been going through, and she delicately announces her transition to her chosen name of Harper.

One of those letters was sent to Ferrell, whom she still considered one of her best friends but who had no idea what she had been going through.

When he finally realizes the depth of his friend's struggle and the toll it has taken on her life, the cisgender Ferrell must confront his own understanding (or not) of her transition. And rather than being shy, he suggests the two go on a road trip across the country and talk about it. The premise is both to reclaim their friendship and redefine it—and to allow Harper the chance to experience traveling for the first time after her transition.

In her previous life, Steele delighted in roaming the country randomly and stopping at dive bars and juke joints for no reason at all. Ferrell is well intentioned in wanting to help her recreate that experience, and so the two set off for parts unknown together in hopes of finding a country where Steele will still feel safe and accepted.

And thankfully, for the most part, they do. But even traveling with Ferrell and using his celebrity as a softener isn't enough to erase transphobia. That tension between hope and reality is the edginess that creates something honest and special. Harper's bravery in exposing her journey to Will is profound and unlike any other dialogue many of us have heard about identity.

There are many moments of pure joy and laughter, but moments of darkness too. Both types had me fighting back tears in empathy and the clarity that there is no denying one's truth."

Harper is one of a number of often reviled and frequently misunderstood individuals across America; some are boldly "out there," while others, sadly, still remain hidden in the shadows of shame. These people might disturb and shock some of us of us of the cisgender community. But they bear a resemblance to those ancient Persian stargazers and palm readers. In those days, Israel was one of those cultures who looked down upon that profession. It is quite a testament to Matthew, the Gospel writer, and a Jew, that he chose to include this story in his Gospel; a story that neither Mark, Luke, or John included. It is a story of the first gentiles to seek after the Christ child, the newborn king of the Jews. It was these pagan palm readers, and not the well to do highly respected gentiles who were the first to seek Jesus out, and to worship him.

The story of these ancient Persian travelers is remembered tomorrow on Epiphany. There is an ancient chalk blessing that dates back to the Middle Ages that is still practiced in Christian communities today. Chalk that has been blessed by a priest is marked above the doors of our homes, bearing three symbols; the current year we are living in, 2025, the sign of the cross, and the first letter of the names of those three ancient stargazers; Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

Those three letters; C, M, and B; are also the first letters of the three Latin words, "Christus, mansionem, and benedicat." "May Christ bless this house." We pray on Epiphany that Christ would bless our houses, and all who dwell within them, and all who find their way to our door as guests.

When we open our doors, and our arms to all, we are acting much like our Lord, who protected the prostitute and touched the leper.

There is an insert in your bulletin on how to bless your home. I will be blessing pieces of chalk, and we will have a responsive reading and a prayer.