

January 6, Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12)

The wise men remind us that stargazing always involves politics.

December 5, 2018

The wise men who come to pay their respects to Jesus may well have been astronomers, astrologers, or some other form of stargazer. Sometimes they are depicted with an astrolabe or some other piece of scientific equipment in addition to their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Such gifts further suggest status and wealth. Whereas we imagine barefoot shepherds making their way to Bethlehem, the Christian tradition made kings of these men.

Matthew says that they are “from the East,” though again tradition has intervened such they are depicted as being from different parts of Asia, Africa, or Europe. Indeed, given that Jerusalem can be seen to be at the intersection of these three great continents, it is easy to understand how these three could come to represent the three portions of the known world coming together to pay homage to the newly born king of the Jews (indeed, the king of all the world).

There is, then, in this text for Epiphany the depiction of an extraordinary hope: the peoples of the earth coming together united in their recognition of what’s important, all offering gifts to the ruler of universe.

When I think of humanity getting its act together, overcoming differences, and working together for a better future, I think of *Star Trek* and its original producer, Gene Roddenberry. He realized that the casting of the crew of the *Enterprise* was a political statement, and so the bridge of the starship eventually depicted officers from different continents of the earth. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized the power of this. Nichelle Nichols, who played Lieutenant Uhura, was thinking of not returning for the second season of the show. King pointed out to her how important it was to see an African American helping to lead a spaceship.

Space exploration remains a symbol of a better future. I was at an interfaith conference where a speaker was talking about what gave him hope. He projected a picture of the earth taken from one of the Mars rovers. That humans can work together, send a technological marvel so far away, and then take a selfie encouraged him to dream about a world no longer divided by violence.

At the time of this gathering, I had just started serving as chaplain at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. We are a university focused on preparing students for the aviation and aerospace sectors. I remember thinking that I wanted to raise my hand and boast, “I’m from a university where the students actually understand the equations that made that marvel possible.” To me they are like the Magi—wise people who can fathom the stars, how planes fly, and what it will take to get not just a rover to Mars but astronauts or even colonists.

Our school’s story also includes one of the worst moments in aviation, religion, and violence. After 9/11, federal authorities investigated Embry-Riddle as part of their work uncovering how the murderers could have learned how to fly planes. One of the terrorists had the same name as one of our former students, but even though that student was still alive and had absolutely nothing to do with the attack, word spread that we had provided the killer’s training. Even today, some people still think that we were involved.

We are proud to have students from the Middle East and from all over the world, and I try to challenge all of them to remember this history. We may be innocent of the violence of 9/11, but that does not mean we do not have a responsibility for striving for a better future. To me, our campus is filled with magi. Those wise men followed a star in the sky, and now that humanity has gotten into the sky, we dream of going beyond the atmosphere, beyond the moon, and even on to other planets and asteroids.

The first person in space, Yuri Gagarin, is said to have declared that he went up there and didn’t see God. For good Soviets in the communist years, astronomy and space exploration were part of the larger propaganda effort. Stargazing and space exploration involve politics and religion. When King Herod hears of the arrival of the wise men in Jerusalem and their questions about stars and the birth of a king, he understands that the stakes are high. Indeed, the hopeful question of the Magi, “Where is the child?” (2:2) will ultimately lead to the murder of many children and the flight to Egypt. Herod’s deception of the “wise” men (he tricks them into giving

him information about when Jesus was born) is a depressing reminder of how wickedness can manipulate science (or turn airplanes into missiles).

The manifestation of God to the gentile nations represented by these Magi is something to celebrate, as is the human exploration of God's creation. But the fact that the story of following a sign in the heavens also leads to the powers and principalities, to racism and murder, should not be too surprising. As the hymn "We Three Kings" reminds us, Jesus will receive not only the gold of royalty and the frankincense of deity but also the "bitter perfume" of the myrrh. Alleluias will "sound through the earth and skies" for the babe who will be all three—not just king of the cosmos, not just God of the universe, but also the sacrifice that a broken, sinful humanity desperately needs.