

Magi on camels? Seriously? (Matthew 2:1-12)

It's all too much like a fairy tale.

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#)

December 31, 2020

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

For the Second Sunday after Christmas readings, see our [online archives](#).

I have a confession to make. Every year, I have a hard time taking the story of Epiphany seriously.

It's all too much like a fairy tale: Kings from faraway lands? Riding camels? While wearing crowns? Being led by a mysterious star? Bringing precious gifts with strange names? And an evil king is after a sweet little baby? And we call them "the Magi," like some kind of gang or secret society of warlocks? C'mon.

And no, it doesn't help to imagine that some of them might be women, or that maybe there were more than three, or that maybe they weren't kings but magicians. Fifteen male and female magicians on camels doesn't make it better, folks.

I admit, Luke 2 can also seem like a stretch, but a teenage girl having a vision, a baby born in a stable, and some dirty shepherds coming to visit is something I can preach on Christmas Eve, no problem. But two weeks later, after everyone has taken their Christmas decorations down (except inside the church), and Americans are getting ready for the Super Bowl (and this year, God help us, Inauguration Day), lo and behold my Gospel reading is "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem," "we have observed his star at its rising," and "gold, frankincense, and myrrh"? Gah. I'd much rather get back to brass tacks and preach on something that could have actually occurred in the life of Jesus, not something that reads like Narnia or *The*

Lord of the Rings.

I loved those books as a teenager. I wrote a book about Advent and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* because that story takes theology so seriously. But this year, many of those characters and plot twists seem unhelpful to me—why make evil into a dragon like Smaug, or an amorphous being like Sauron, or a mean Barbie like the White Witch, when harm, dictatorship, and evil in real life are even more dramatic, striking, and terrifying? Sure, Simone Weil said, “Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring,” but is that true these days? Weil never saw evil as it’s manifested on Twitter, Facebook, or 8chan.

I’m not sure what lesson the story of Epiphany will have for the United States this year, in the wake of so much turmoil in public health, political campaigns, and I’m-afraid-to-guess-what-else by the time this goes to press. I worry that, as a fairy tale, Epiphany sounds like an escape story: fleeing a murderous king, the Magi “left for their own country by another way” and the Holy Family become refugees in Egypt. No matter how this year turns out and the next one begins, I’m not sure that’s the message Jesus would want to give us.

G.K. Chesterton once wrote that fairy tales don’t exist to teach children that monsters—or as he called them, “bogey”—exist, because “The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination.” Instead, he says, fairy tales teach children that dragons can be defeated. Like fairy tales, the story of salvation teaches us that there are powers greater than monsters, whether fairy or human, in the universe. Chesterton explains this as: “the idea that these limitless terrors [have] a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear.”

Fairy tales, frankincense, and shining stars seem beside the point to me this year, but I can’t disagree with that. No matter what terrors, fears, or violence we may face in our nation, our communities, or our personal lives, there is something in the universe that is stronger. There is a conspiracy bigger than all other conspiracies. Terrors that may seem limitless, in fact, have a limit. Thanks be to God.