

The Magi's interfaith encounter (Matthew 2:1-12)

And six stars they offer for our own

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Like our contemporary communities, first century Judea was a multireligious society. In port cities and along trading routes, adherents of the Mediterranean world's varied faith traditions encountered one another, discovering their differences and their common ground.

The Gospels depict many of these interfaith connections. The first is here in the second chapter of Matthew, as the Magi—usually thought to be Babylonian or Persian astrologers, perhaps of the Zoroastrian faith—meet King Herod's Jewish court and the holy family.

In our own interfaith encounters, we can learn much from the Magi about how to be in relationship with our neighbors of varied faith traditions. Here are six stars they offer that can guide our way:

Cross boundaries. The Magi did not wait for the newborn king to find them. Instead, they actively searched for an opportunity to greet him. They disrupted their lives, packed their bags, and set out on a long journey, compelled by this opportunity to meet the King of the Jews. Interfaith encounters require us to take initiative. We can be the ones to make the first phone call and write the first email introduction. We can be the ones to travel to the home turf of the other, rather than expecting others to come to us.

Be curious. The Magi knew of a prophecy relating to the birth of a king of the Jews, but they were not familiar with the Hebrew scriptures describing where the Messiah might be born. Instead of trying to decode the texts alone, they went to those most knowledgeable about the faith and asked for help. Our experience is deepened when we ask good questions to those who know their traditions best, rather than making assumptions and trying to figure everything out on our own.

Recognize the holy in the other. When the Magi found the child, they “rejoiced exceedingly”—or, as R. T. France puts it, “they were thrilled to bits”—and knelt before him. We may not always be able to participate fully in our neighbors’ worship, but we can still experience the numinous in our encounters. We can recognize the ways God is at work in their life together, and we can honor the sacred as they experience it.

Bring your best to the encounter. The Magi brought precious gifts to the child, items with both symbolic and practical significance. We can leave our myrrh at home, but we can still offer our best selves to our neighbors, entering into interfaith connections with generosity of spirit, with kindness, and with open minds.

Take risks for the other’s well-being. It would have been easy for the Magi to return to Jerusalem as instructed, telling Herod exactly where to find Jesus. Instead, they chose to depart in secret, guarding Jesus’ location and seeking to keep him safe. In a nation where Christians are the majority, we must pay attention to our neighbors’ safety as they practice other faiths, and we must be willing to sacrifice to ensure their free exercise is possible.

Expect to be changed. The Magi did not return by the same road, but found a new way home. Our interfaith encounters are transformative. They will change our perspectives; they will sharpen our empathy; they will enrich our understanding. We will not go back the same as the way we came.

Two thousand years later, as we embark on our own interfaith experiences, we can give thanks for another gift of the Magi: their example in making meaningful connection across religious difference.