

AColyte

Epiphany 2019
A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College

2 QUESTIONS 4 2019

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Chaplain's Office
Wynne Chapel
January 3, 2019

I know a little.
--Lynyrd Skynyrd



OK, so here's the deal:

I've worked on the other side of the wall from this piece of art for nearly 15 years.

And I've never really liked it.

It just looks so flat.

And bland.

And 20th century.

And somehow kind of white (not in a good way).

And vaguely patriarchal.

Do you see what I mean?

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Some of it is the name of the piece.

According to the little bar at the bottom, it's called "Wise Men Still Seek Him."

I've never really liked that.

Is it possible that there might be "Wise Men" (or Women) who aren't interested in seeking Jesus at all?

Of course. No doubt.

Now, to be fair, I think there might be Wise Women and Men who do still seek him – whatever that means.

The mosaic is clearly a representation of the Bible's story of the "wise men from the East" who show up in Jerusalem in Matthew 2, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and come to pay him homage."

That's kind of a cool story.

And I do like art that depicts stories from the Bible.

But look closely at the faces of the men in the mosaic.

They're looking pretty white to me.

I don't think it's likely that three smart guys who showed up in Jerusalem (and later Bethlehem) 2000 or so years ago would have had such fair complexions.

Just sayin'.

And what's with the 3 crosses?

I've always assumed that was meant to represent the three crosses on the hill where Jesus will be crucified about 25 chapters later in Matthew's Gospel.

But what did the Wise Men know about that?

And why did they have crosses with them?

And if those aren't crosses, what the heck are they?

What does that add to the depiction of the Wise Men?

And – by the way – the Bible never mentions that there were *three* Wise Men. The Church has developed the tradition that there were three of them just because Matthew mentions three different gifts that they offer to Jesus in Matthew 2:11.

But what if one of them could carry more than one gift?

Or what if there were other Wise Men with them who weren't carrying any gifts at all?

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I've just never particularly liked that mosaic. And I've seen it on and off for nearly 40 years.

I learned how to think critically at Austin College. And I don't think that mosaic really stands up very well to rigid critical analysis.

But now, as we move forward with the Chapel renovation, I find myself looking at it with some nostalgic affection.

The little plate at the bottom says, "Walter Erwin – '57."

There was nobody named Walter Erwin in the Austin College Class of 1957, so I assume the "'57" on the plate represents the year he created the mosaic.

That would have been the year before Wynne Chapel was completed and dedicated.

I'd say it's likely that Walter Erwin created that mosaic specifically to hang in Wynne Chapel.

And that's cool.

Here's to Walter Erwin – seriously.

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January 6 is the day every year when Christians like me pay particular attention to the story of the Wise Men and their visit to Jesus as it's told in Matthew 2.

And, as I said above, I think it's kind of a cool story.

1 In the time of King Herod,
after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

See? Matthew doesn't say how many there were.

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."

So--just to be clear – the “Wise Men” apparently got up and went to some considerable trouble because they were intrigued and inspired by a star.

They got up off their learned butts and went toward it. They went toward something they found interesting.

We’ll pick up the story in verse 9:

...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.

So they started following the star and, eventually, they “got there.”

Because people are like we are, lots of smart folks have spent a lot of time trying to “explain” or “prove” how there could have been a particularly unusual star in the sky above Bethlehem at that time.

I’m not sure that’s the point.

We should just let the story be what it is.

10 When they saw that the star had stopped,
they were overwhelmed with joy.

11 On entering the house, they saw the child

“The child” would be Jesus.

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.

So they got there.

They felt good.

And they gave him stuff.

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Here comes a sharp turn.
--ED

On Christmas Eve, I preached a sermon in Wynne Chapel called "We Like Sheep (and Motown Music)." I'd be happy to send you a copy if you ask me for it.

Part of what I talked about was Isaiah 53:6 ("All we like sheep have gone astray"). But there's another sheep image in the next verse that I couldn't work into that sermon.

Isaiah 53:7 :

7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

That's poetry Isaiah uses to describe a "suffering servant" who bears the punishment of the people of God who have "gone astray."

But I don't want to talk about that right now.

I just want to direct your attention to one image from that verse:

like a sheep that before its shearers is silent.

I'm not an experienced sheep-herder.

And I've never actually sheared a sheep.

But I know some stuff.

I've been where sheep were being sheared.



And I know that terrified sheep are not silent sheep.

Sheep are loud most of the time but they get quiet when they are being sheared because that feels *good*. The vibration of the shears and the loss of all that hot wool feels good to most sheep.

And I'm captivated by that image.

A healthy sheep can't help but produce good wool. It doesn't take any particular effort on the part of the sheep. It just does what it does. But as long as it stays healthy and is adequately nourished and cared for, it can produce wool that can be a source of comfort to others.

Year after year after year.

This sappy old preacher likes that image.

If the sheep simply goes about its business, it can produce something that benefits someone else.

And the process of making its gift (wool) available to others who need it makes the sheep feel good.

Maybe I'll use this logic to encourage my son to get a haircut.

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So let's wrap this up.

At the beginning of all this, I promised you TWO QUESTIONS FOR 2019.

Here they are:

1 WHAT STAR(S) WILL YOU FOLLOW?

What interests, intrigues, and inspires you?

What will make you get up off your learned butt and go towards something?

I know real, live Austin College students whose stars include

- Physical Chemistry,
- Sociology,
- Service to At-Risk Women,
- Service to Others Who Don't Live Where We Live,
- Biology Research,
- History, and
- Teaching others about those things and many more things.

And that's just a tiny part of the galaxy.

Pay attention. The sky is full.

#2 WHO'LL GET YOUR WOOL?

You won't always get to choose who benefits from good things that you can't keep from producing.

But sometimes you can pick where you go to get sheared.

Think about that.

For whom do you want to do what you do?

And remember: that wool gets hot and stinky and heavy if you don't give some of it up from time to time.

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I'm trying to wrap all this up with some kind of astronomical sweater image, but it keeps unraveling.

So I'll just close (or is it "clothes"?).

Until Next Time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Sincerely Grateful for Walter Erwin's Itchy Wool,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain