

In the name of God, the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As a child, I remember being fascinated by optical illusions. I could spend hours looking at the famous book, *The Magic Eye*. Does anyone remember those books? I think I got one for Christmas one year, actually. And these Magic Eye books with enough luck could transform a seemingly jumbled pattern into a 3D image. But you couldn't try to look too hard because if you did, it just got stubborn and it seemed impossible to see the image through the chaos. And another optical illusion I remember was in a psychology class. I remember studying the famous image of Rubin's vase. It's a simple black and white picture, but when the class looked at it, half of the class saw a vase and the other half saw two faces. It all depended on if you were looking at the object or the background.

And after looking at it for a while as a class, we'd hear people say, "Oh, I see it. It's a vase too. Oh, I see it. It's also a face." We could see two different images in the same thing. But then there were always others who spent the whole class looking at the picture and saying, "I don't see it. I can't see anything else but this face." Never able to change perspectives. And it was never lost on me that two people could look at the exact same thing and see things completely different. I think that's a situation we have in the gospel text this morning. It's the same image. We all know the image the gospel writer Matthew was talking about. A baby swaddled in clothes, Mary, Joseph, some animals on a cold, dark night tucked in close in somebody's barn. A shepherd or Mary or Joseph or me, see a promise.

A king had come, a king that they had waited a very, very long time for. A king that would rule like no other. This image was comfort. This was joy. This was holy. Herod, on the other hand, and the rest of Jerusalem looked at that image and saw a threat. He was afraid, disturbed even as some of the translations put it. And so, he sought clarity and power and control. There's a lot of movement in this brief birth story. We're only one short

chapter and 12 verses into Matthew's gospel and we've already covered a family lineage going back 14 generations. We've covered Mary and Joseph traveling a great distance to go to Bethlehem. We've seen the shepherds running in from the fields, the angels descending from their heavenly thrones. Even a star seems to be on the move. Everything in this image is moving. And soon the Magi will embark on their move, on their journey to meet this tiny babe.

When I was in college, I took an astronomy course because I thought it would be fun and it was. It was very fun. Highly recommend learning about astronomy, opened my eyes to a lot of things. And our main assignment, our main homework every night was to watch the night skies. And it didn't take very long for me to figure out the language and the pattern of the stars. It was just like learning another language. They are rather predictable, reasonable things, these stars. But for all of their predictability, there was always an element of unpredictability. Each night my class would go out looking up. Would we find something new? Was there anything else out there that everyone else was missing because they weren't looking up? Was that an airplane light or was that a meteor? Took us a while to figure out the difference. The Magi, or the kings, or the wisemen, or whatever we call them, however we know them, would have had a similar experience as they would have studied these lights as well.

Alongside with being astronomers, they are Gentiles. They're outsiders in this story. And likely they don't go expecting to find a baby as a threat like Herod did. I'd be very curious to know from these wise men what they did expect to find when they followed this star the long way. It doesn't say what they thought, but I highly doubt when they were sent to go look for a king, they would have believed they'd end up in a barn. And so perhaps it was their lack of preconceived notions, or awareness of Herod's true intentions, that led to their reactions that final night, that final sight. The text tells us that they were overwhelmed with joy.

When's the last time you were overwhelmed with joy? I think it's a rare emotion. Feeling joy? Sure. We get that. I hope you all get that. Feeling joy? Yes, but overwhelmed by it? I don't think that's an everyday thing. The only other time the gospel writer mentions being overwhelmed with joy is when the angels tell the women at the empty tomb that Jesus is alive. It's the joy that comes when something is completely unexpected, when we are knocked over by the impossible somehow in some way being possible. A miracle, some would call that. The moments that make absolutely no sense, but that we are certain of. The magi so often represent something that is so pivotal in the Christmas story, that meeting the baby Jesus is both for us overwhelmingly joyful and life changing. These magi get it. They're changed by it. They have what the Bible calls eyes to see and ears to hear, because they also pick up on Herod's plan in a dream. In a dream?

Now, I don't know about you, but I can barely remember a dream long enough to tell it to my morning coffee, let alone have the courage to follow a dream, to follow what a dream told me to go all the way to disobeying a powerful ruler. And yet that's exactly what these magi do. They don't argue. They don't hesitate. They don't ask God to send them another dream so that they could double check that this was the real thing. They don't sneak back to Herod and explain themselves. They just go. They just know. They just trust. They are changed. They go home another way. And in fact, in that act, the story of Jesus continues to unfold. Because in the end, in the end of the story, in the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus was both. He was a promise. He was the promise. He was a king and he came to set his people free. And he was also a threat. He was a threat to power, and he was a threat to stifling rules. And if we see this little, tiny baby as both of those things, then the gospel narrative we have in this one short chapter in 12 verses isn't just telling us where Jesus came from and who he was. It's also telling us what he will do, which is to set us free.

On these final days of Christmastide, when the nativity set is still out, when the magi approach the newborn king in all of their wonder and innocence, let's ask ourselves, what do we see? What are we moved to do? Herod stayed put, unwilling to be changed, unwilling to be challenged by such a small, helpless scene, but we don't have to be. We can stand in awe. We can move with the story. We can seek and we can find. We can worship and wonder. We can decide to go home a different way. We can be the ones whose eyes are opened to this miracle and all that has been given to us. Amen.