

# “Home by Another Way” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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## Epiphany

Today is Epiphany, 12 days after Christmas; the traditional Catholic feast day celebrating the Three Kings, who journeyed from “the East” to honor the baby Jesus. Hispanic countries celebrate the Three Kings as their primary gift-givers—maybe because a jolly saint in a fur-trimmed suit riding in a sleigh makes no sense in a Caribbean climate. It’s too hot. Camels make more sense.

Many of us use Epiphany to mark the end of the Christmas season and pack away the Christmas ornaments. A month ago, we were delighted to see the three wise women in lab coats bring practical gifts to the baby Jesus: a care pack, full of clean socks, soap and toothpaste; cloth diapers, to help save the environment; and a warm blanket, for cold desert nights. Those practical gifts speak of the part that the Wise Ones play in our story of Jesus here at Seekers.

**But first,** let’s turn to the scriptures assigned for today. The “journey of the magi” is a biblical story we know well. Let me ask you a couple of questions:

- How did the wise men travel to Jerusalem?
- What did they bring as gifts for the baby?

Actually, the story in Matthew doesn’t say anything about the wise

men coming on camels, or about bringing gold, frankincense or myrrh either. The image of gold and frankincense come from Isaiah, and myrrh comes from a similar scene in Micah. Christmas card images and countless sermons have conflated the two stories. When Matthew included the story of the wise men in his birth narrative, he reached back into the treasured words of the Prophets as a midrash to describe the meaning of Jesus' life. It's a teaching story, not historical record.

Scholars think that Matthew was written about 70 A.D., about the time that the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem and expelled all Jews from the city. The wise men might have been included to remind those early Jewish believers of their own tradition—that God works through foreigners as well as their own leaders. Unlike most religions of Isaiah's time, the Jewish tradition was not exclusive. They understood God as the ruler of all creation, capable of using other kings and other prophets to guide their destiny as God's chosen people. It's shockingly different from our Christian tradition of being "the only way." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls this Jewish tradition of respect for other ways to God, "the dignity of difference."

Just as Isaiah was written to bring hope to the people who had been taken as slaves to Babylon when the First Temple was destroyed, Matthew's account of the wise men was included to remind the earliest Jewish believers that God was still speaking in whatever foreign lands they might find themselves—that there would be Gentiles who would recognize the Jewish Messiah, even though they did not become followers of "The Way," (as early Christians were known). Our understanding of this story and this element of tolerance is immensely enriched by knowing the stories from Second Isaiah, which were indeed like a guiding star for the earlier Exiles, calling them to embrace and embody their allegiance to the God of all creation.

I grew up thinking that Isaiah was actually predicting the birth of Jesus, because that's what I heard in church. I thought the Old Testament was just that—old, out of date, full of judgment and violence, while the New Testament was full of Jesus, miracles and love. I am embarrassed to say that I thought the New Testament trumped the Old, and that everyone would eventually "see the light" as Isaiah predicted, and become a Christian.

NOW I see that the whole biblical story reveals the mystery of God-with-us; that the Gospel writers were reaching back to their own Jewish tradition in order to describe how the inclusive message of Christ had entered human history. As an adult, here in our School of Christian Living, I began to realize that Paul's letters were actually the first record of Jesus as the Risen Christ, and there is NO reference to his birth in Paul's writings. In fact, there is little about the human life and ministry of Jesus in Paul's writings. Instead, Paul himself, was converted by a blinding light on the road to Damascus, and he spent the rest of his life preaching about "the riches of Christ" to Jews and Gentiles alike. In other words, Paul spent his life on the road (like the Magi), offering his gifts to a broken and hungry world.

Paul tangled with some of the earliest disciples of Jesus because he trusted the revelation that he had been given—that Gentiles did not have to become circumcised Jews in order to be baptized. Paul, who was also a Pharisee and a teacher of Jewish Law, picked up on the language of Isaiah too. His letters are full of references to the glory of God, the light of Christ, and mystery of God's grace.

**And that brings us to our theme for this season: "Taking our gifts into the world."** I want to start with quotes from two saints in our own recent tradition, from The Church of the Saviour. The first is Elizabeth O'Connor, from her book, Eighth Day of Creation:

*We ask to know the will of God without guessing that his will is written into our very beings. We perceive that will when we discern our gifts. Our obedience and surrender to God are in large part our obedience and surrender to our gifts.*

The second is Verna Dozier, from her book, The Dream of God. Verna wrote:

*The church is the people of God. It takes two forms, the church gathered and the church scattered. We gather to break bread as a community, to hear our story, and to recommit ourselves to the dream of God. We scatter to live into that dream. **It is the task of the church, the people of God, to minister within the structures of society. It is the role of the church, the institution, to support that ministry.***

Verna taught in the public schools of the District of Columbia for 32

years. Then she began her second career as a practical theologian. When people would say, "Did you teach school before you began your ministry?" She would stare them down, saying, "No, I am just continuing my ministry in another form. Teaching has always been my call."

For the past 30 years, I have been working with these quotes in various ways, to help people discern their call and gifts for ministry, right here, right now. It is a life-changing process, to identify where God has called you to make a difference in the world where you live and work. I will be offering another class on discerning call at the School in February. Perhaps it is time for you to revisit your call now, at this particular time in your life. Pat will also be offering a class on "knowing Jesus." I hope you'll consider coming.

At Seekers, we have chosen to be part of a community where we are the workers, the servants, the help. We do not have the luxury of thinking that we have hired a staff to do ministry for us. We come as close to embracing Paul's theology of being the body of Christ, with different gifts for different functions, as any church that I know of. We expect everyone to offer something, not just here in the church, but in the classrooms and soup kitchens and legal chambers of the world. Our work is to make God's dream a reality for all, not just a "friendly place" for a few.

Part of the heritage which we have received from the Old Testament prophets who show up with the Wise Men on this Epiphany Sunday, is the Good News that our gifts are needed and wanted for the healing of the world. In this story, Isaiah and Micah call us to the great Hebrew tradition of bringing justice and mercy for all into a self-centered, self-referencing culture. We lose the power of this story when we ignore our Jewish heritage of hospitality for strangers, care for the marginalized, and hope for the oppressed.

And when we read that the "wise men returned home by another way," we understand that the way will not always be smooth; that Herod and his henchmen will always be threatened by expanding the circle of power to include others—outsiders, enemies, strangers. We also understand that some will bring their gifts to this community and leave again, as the Three Kings did. Others will stay, to join and become part of the body

here. But ALL of us are called to kneel by the manger and offer our gifts, no matter what the cost. That is the life-giving gift of the magi.

By keeping the sermon short this morning, I hope we will have time after communion to identify the symbols which Celebration Circle asked us to bring, symbols of taking our gifts out into the world. That's also our part of the story.

May God bless this reading of the Word.

Amen.