“Holy Disobedience,”
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 1/4/26

“Three wise women would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stables, made a casserole, and there would be peace on earth!” Maybe you’ve seen this quote in a social media post, on a tea towel at a gift shop, or as I did, on a coaster at my parents’ house, undoubtedly brought by one of my mom’s book club friends. Three wise women would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stables, and made a casserole – the implication of course being, what good are three wise men who arrive as much as two years after the baby is born? And what good are gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the tired parents of a toddler? Would have been better to bring diapers. And wine.

Now, I am all for finding the women in Biblical stories. It’s one of the many gifts our new associate Emily brings to us, in fact – helping us find the women hiding in plain sight in our Bible stories, women who had full lives, who had deep relationships with God, women who contributed to their communities and to their faith traditions, often without much recognition from the writers of history, Biblical or otherwise. When we read any passage from Scripture, it is always worth asking, where are the women?

And at the same time, though this quote on a coaster makes me laugh the knowing laugh of a tired mom of a, well, maybe not quite toddler anymore, it also gives the wise men short shrift. A closer look at this familiar story reveals plenty we can learn from them.

First, let’s clear up a few things, starting with this term, “wise men.” That’s a translation of the Greek word *magoi*. As far as we can tell, *magoi* were literate political officials from regions east of Judea, areas like Parthia and Armenia. There’s a lot we don’t know about *magoi*, but they were clearly trained in astrology, reading the stars for signs, and possibly also in magical arts. Matthew never says anything about *three* wise men – he just says “magi from the east” came to pay homage to Jesus. There could have been a whole group of them.

And that group could possibly have included women – in ancient Greek, as in modern Spanish and many other languages, as soon as one man enters the group, the collective noun becomes masculine. So the text of Matthew’s gospel gives us room to look for women here among this group of magi, here where our culture has come to picture three men in voluminous robes with crowns or turbans atop their heads, the moon making long their shadows as they travel across the desert. Let’s imagine instead a larger and more mixed group, coming with a caravan of supplies for their long journey and probably servants or attendants too.

Whoever and however many these magi are exactly, they come to Jerusalem and the first thing they do, contrary to popular coasters, is ask for directions. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” they inquire. Matthew makes it seem as though they are asking around town, stopping ordinary people on the street and poking their heads into market stalls, looking for clues. Having followed the star from wherever they called home to the capital of Judea, perhaps a journey of many months, they have now reached the end of their ability to divine the way. They need help. And so they ask for it.

When Herod, king of Judea and client of the Roman Emperor Augustus, hears that they’ve been poking around town, he calls together the chief priests and the scribes to ask where the Messiah is to be born. The religious officials look to the Scriptures for the answer, landing on the town of Bethlehem, hometown of the revered King David and just a few miles from the center of Jerusalem. And so Herod secretly sends the magi there and asks them to report back on what they’ve found.

Perhaps this is the first lesson we can learn from the magi – to ask for help when we need it. To recognize when we are at the limit of our own knowledge, at the limit of our own ability to divine the way forward. Not even people noted for their wisdom know everything, so there’s no shame in asking for help. We can ask for the shared wisdom of the community – that’s a very Presbyterian way of discerning the way forward, in fact, asking the community to share its wisdom and understanding with us.

And like the chief priests and scribes, we can also go to Scripture for help when we are feeling lost. What does the word of God tell us about the way of God? At our best, this is what we are doing when we worship together each Sunday – looking into the Scriptures to learn how the Word of God might direct our lives. Scripture is not our only source of wisdom, of course, but it certainly is a deep one. So we learn from the magi: admit when you’ve reached your limits, ask for help, look to Scripture for wisdom on how to move forward.

Now that they know they will find the child in Bethlehem, the magi pick up their caravan and continue on their journey, the star going ahead of them until it reaches the resting place of the Christ child. Matthew tells us that before the magi even enter the house, they are overwhelmed with joy. Joy at reaching their goal – joy at finding the child who is born king of the Jews. Upon entering, they pay Jesus homage: they get down on their knees in a gesture of deference, of reverence. They recognize that they are in the presence of one who is worthy of their devotion. And they offer their gifts – not as practical as diapers and a bottle of wine, to be sure, but gifts fit for a king. Gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, precious metals and costly spices, valuable gifts given freely, without expectation of receiving anything in return.

And perhaps this is the second lesson we can learn from the magi: with joy, to offer ourselves wholly to Jesus the Christ. To offer him our deference, our reverence and devotion. To bring him the very best we have to offer: the gifts of our lives, the gifts of our time, our talent, and even our treasure. We can learn from the magi to bring Jesus the very best we have to offer, to lay it at his feet for his use, for the building up of his kingdom. Like the magi, we can humbly dedicate ourselves to Christ's way.

Having done what they set out to do, the magi turn to go home. Herod has of course asked them to make a stop back at his royal palace first, to share what they have learned about the child so that he may also go and pay homage. It doesn't take much reading between the lines of Matthew's text to see Herod's true motivations. When Herod first hears of the magi, Matthew tells us he is frightened – presumably frightened by anyone or anything that would challenge his own power. Herod amassed his power through military conquest, and as the client of the emperor, his job is to protect the status quo of Roman authority in the region. Anyone who could claim to be king of the Jews would be a threat to that power. Herod looks to stamp out any risk to his total control – and he's not afraid to use deception or cruelty to do it.

Whether the magi catch on to Herod's true motivations, the gospel does not tell us. But it does tell us they are warned in a dream not to return to him, not to reveal the child's location. Throughout Matthew, God speaks to people in dreams. We don't know the exact religion of the magi, but they were certainly not worshippers of the God of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, God speaks to them, asking them to defy Herod's command and travel home by another road.

This would not have been without risk for the magi. Herod's cruelty extended to killing perhaps hundreds of innocent children to protect his own power – if he had learned that the magi were leaving his kingdom without following his orders, without reporting back to him, who knows what he might have done to them. Yet the magi leave without a word to Herod anyway. They follow *God's* word to them in the dream. As loudly as they announced their arrival in Jerusalem, just as quietly do they slip out of the country, never to be seen or heard from again.

And so perhaps this is the third and final lesson we can learn from the magi today – that sometimes obedience to God requires disobedience to the powers that be. Sometimes doing what is right requires us to defy the authority of earthly rulers. I have at times heard Christians use other parts of the Bible to justify total submission to the government, whatever it chooses to do. But the magi make it clear – we do not follow the directions of earthly rulers who threaten innocent people. We do not follow the directions of earthly rulers who govern by cruelty. If the government is unjust, disobedience can be a holy act.

I am reminded of the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," written to fellow clergy urging him to a slower, more moderate approach in the fight for civil rights. He writes: "You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break the law. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, 'How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?' The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws… Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."[1]

King knew what the magi did, that there is a time to obey human authority, and a time to act out against it. Disobeying human authority may come with great personal risk, as King knew well, writing as he did from his jail cell. But to obey an unjust law may be to degrade the humanity of a neighbor, to risk the life of a neighbor; to obey may be to ignore the voice of God, whispering to our conscience.

So we learn much from the magi. To the coaster's point, they are not the best role models for how to help the tired parents of toddlers, though if you're looking for advice on that front we have plenty of parents of young ones around who you can ask. But we *can* learn from the magi to ask for help when we are at the limits of our ability to know, and to seek the wisdom of Scripture in discerning the way forward. We *can* learn from the magi to pay homage to Jesus, to offer our very best to him in dedication to his reign. And we *can* learn from the magi the art of holy disobedience, of finding another road home when to obey human authority is to risk the lives of those whom God loves. Perhaps these magi are wise men – and maybe wise women – after all.