

“Through biblical stories and careful exegesis, Nancy Haught shows how God’s abundant grace is oftentimes present and active where we least expect it: in the outsiders, the marginalized, the strangers in the land. By re-examining familiar stories and lesser-known characters in the Bible, Haught confirms the words of St. Paul that ‘God chose the lowly and despised, those who count for nothing,’ to bring God’s revelation and truth ‘to those who count for something’ (1 Cor 1:28). Beautifully written in a clear, engaging, and poetic style, *Sacred Strangers* will inspire the reader to look beyond religious and societal stereotypes to see how God’s abiding love creates prophets and saviors, even in ‘the least’ among us. We need this book now more than ever.”

— Msgr. Patrick S. Brennan  
Pastor, St. Mary’s Cathedral, Portland, Oregon

“*Sacred Strangers* reminds us that God cares for and protects the very people whom we identify as foreign and suspect. Through careful examination of several Bible stories about those ‘other’ people, *Sacred Strangers* shows us that these outsiders are both blessed by God and used by God to carry out God’s work in the world. This book is a timely antidote against xenophobia and religious intolerance: the people whom we push away and exclude may be God’s messengers and part of God’s divine plan. This book is an excellent resource for group and individual Bible study, preachers and teachers, or anybody who wants to more fully appreciate the mysterious ways God works in our lives.”

— The Rev. Sarah Coakley Lewis, pastor  
Piedmont Presbyterian Church, Portland, Oregon

“Nancy Haught’s fresh *Sacred Strangers* is a brilliant conversation with the rest of us about unsung role models in the Bible. Haught makes the case that people we hardly know in Scripture—or in our lives today—could light our paths and elevate humanity in the twenty-first century. Prepare for delicious prose, insight, and inspiration.”

— Joann Byrd, longtime newspaper reporter, editor, and former  
Pulitzer Prize board member, author

"In an age in which the stranger is distrusted and rejected, Haught's book calls Christians to explore the rich spiritual gifts awaiting them from 'the other.' *Sacred Strangers* is not only pertinent—it is a necessary compass in these trying times."

— Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell  
Minister Emerita  
First Unitarian Church, Portland, Oregon

"'Strangers mystify us,' Nancy Haught writes, yet they help us learn about ourselves, our beliefs, and our world—and for these reasons they are people to engage, not fear and reject. With clarity, insight, and skill, Haught convincingly shows how the Bible compels Christians to enter relationship and dialogue with those of other faiths and beliefs. This book is a much-needed contribution to interfaith and cross-cultural understanding in a time of deepening division."

— Tom Krattenmaker  
*USA Today* contributing columnist  
Author, *Confessions of a Secular Jesus Follower*

"Reading *Sacred Strangers* is like hearing six inspiring homilies, attending an uplifting retreat, and learning from your favorite Scripture professor all at the same time. Haught has the ability to make Scripture come alive as she weaves the scholarly with the practical. There has never been a more important time for a book like *Sacred Strangers*. The discussion questions are excellent. I can't wait to use this book with our parents and faculty."

— Patricia Gorman  
Theology Department Chairperson  
St. Mary's Academy, Portland, Oregon

# Sacred Strangers

What the Bible's Outsiders Can Teach Christians

Nancy Haught



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*For Freddy, who always believed I had a book in me.*



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## Preface

**N**ot long ago, I reached for my Bible. The worn, blue, cloth-covered book had seen me through seminary twenty-five years ago. It had sustained me through years of teaching high school and college religion courses. It had spurred my daily newspaper reporting on religion for decades. But on this particular day, the frayed binding slipped from my fingers. Holy Scripture landed face down on the floor. Inwardly, I cringed, remembering a seminary professor who was scandalized by how casually some of his students treated our copies of the Bible. Outwardly, I bent to pick up the slips of paper that had scattered across the rug:

My beloved husband's handwritten note left on the day I graduated from seminary.

The outline of a long-ago talk about why I love the Old Testament.

A yellowing, folded copy of my wedding vows—typed thirty-three years ago.

And a *New Yorker* cartoon that I read again that day for the thousandth time. A man and a woman sit in their living room. "I'm sorry, dear. I wasn't listening," she says to him. "Could you repeat what you've said since we've been married?"

As I gathered up the scraps that have been stuck in my Bible for years, I thought about why I keep them between its covers. These bits and pieces from my life remind me that the Bible *is* what they *are*:

A handwritten love letter.

A declaration of devotion.

A promise for the future.

And one side of a conversation that I have not always heard.

Like pottery shards displayed in a museum, these scattered bits and pieces are artifacts that reflect my attitude toward Scripture. I do not believe that every word in the Bible was spoken by God. Or that the stories within it are factual. I do believe that the Bible contains truth that careful readings can reveal. I also believe that careful readings are hard to come by in our world today. They require background and context. Very often, they overturn our pre-conceptions. A careful reading takes into account history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, rhetoric, and style—at the very least. It's a daunting task to sift through so much material in search of the meaning, or even *a* meaning, buried in a biblical text.

Meaning. There's the rub. It's folly, I think, to assume that a particular Bible passage has only one meaning. A good *New Yorker* cartoon carries many different meanings. So it can be hard to know with any certainty what a handful of lines from the Bible might have meant to the person who wrote them or read them or heard them for the first time. Let alone what those same lines may mean to us now, generations later. Sometimes it's easier to read past difficult passages or rely on someone else to do the scholarship and decode the message for us. We all do that from time to time. But when we skip passages or rely on others' interpretations, however well meant they may be, we may overlook a sliver of truth. An insight that could inspire and support our faith and enrich our lives.

We live in a difficult world. As I write, the United States is at war against terrorism and wary of countries that may be on the brink of nuclear weaponry. Refugees from the Middle East and Africa are flooding Europe and making their way more slowly into the United States. Immigration, whether it is illegal or not, is a political issue as Americans worry about the loss of jobs, the struggle to fund education, and the growth of the federal budget. The gap between

rich and poor widens and the middle class shrinks. Mass shootings and fatal encounters with police begin to seem commonplace. Religion is not a refuge. People of faith are at odds over gay marriage, abortion, the death penalty, and refugees. Whatever we believe or don't believe about God, we are all surrounded by fear, mistrust, even hatred of people whose religious beliefs are different from our own. The notion of "religious tolerance" seems almost quaint. An old-fashioned phrase that sounds, in theory, like a good idea, but breaks down in practice.

But before we Christians surrender to these trying times, consider one truth that runs through the Bible, one we often overlook: Scripture is shot through with stories of "outsiders" who know God better than the "insiders." By insiders, I mean the Hebrews or the Israelites or the Jews or the followers of Jesus, the people who usually believe that they occupy God's inner circle, the ones we modern readers identify with when we read the Bible. When we consider these stories carefully, they remind those of us on the inside that we have much to learn from those on the outside. Strangers—the "others" whom we suspect, fear, distrust, dismiss, even damn—may be sacred. They may be living examples of holiness that we need to survive, even thrive, in a world where violence aims to separate us and mire us all in despair. Strangers become our teachers, if we are willing to pay attention.



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I've thought about this book for a long time, and many people have helped me see it through. I am indebted to my writing group, Peggy McMullen, JoLene Krawczak, and David Stabler, who read bits and pieces over and over, always with encouragement; to three of my teachers, Gina Hens-Piazza, Patricia Gorman, and Msgr. Patrick S. Brennan, who helped me appreciate the power of Scripture; to my first editor and dear friend, Joann Byrd; to the Rev. Sarah Coakley Lewis, an early reader with good suggestions; to Ed and Dawn Kropp, who lent me their lovely beach house so I could write in a beautiful place; to my friend Faiza Noor; and to my beloved sons, Ante and Nels Vulin, who took this project seriously and spurred me on when I needed it, and to their beautiful wives, Emily Kropp and Ashley Vulin, who inspire me in their own ways and to whom I have entrusted my greatest treasure. All the mistakes in this manuscript are mine.



# Introduction

## Me First

Faiza and I made quick work of the Thanksgiving program for our Muslim-Christian dialogue group. We decided to ask students and adults from each tradition to talk briefly about what they'd gained by knowing each other. Once we'd decided who to ask and nailed down the program details, we relaxed over our coffee at Starbucks. She talked about her daughters' school and the challenges of being a part-time university student herself. I remembered my own experience, juggling children and seminary studies—taking the time to sew Halloween costumes the night before my first Hebrew exam. I sympathized with Faiza. And I joked about being newly retired and facing an opposite challenge—having too much time on my hands.

But religion is what had brought the two of us together in the first place, so our small talk soon turned to more spiritual matters. Faiza, who is Muslim, had been attending a Christian Bible study. Her presence made it a “nontraditional” Bible study, she quipped. But all the women were united in their efforts to grow closer to God, she said. Over time, she had listened intently to the women's prayers. She was surprised that their petitions were so specific and that they spoke with confidence that God would do what they had asked. Their prayers cut to the heart of the matter and didn't include much in the way of thanksgiving or praise. In her own experience of Islam, thanksgiving and praise are the heart of prayer, she said. Prayers often quote passages from the Qur'an, the sacred book of

## 2 *Sacred Strangers*

Islam. Personal requests may be rare in public. Faiza thought of prayer as a general call for help, strength, or blessing.

Driving home, I thought about my own prayer practice, how it had changed over the years. In high school, I'd prayed that the Jell-O I'd made would set up before dinner. Later, when my husband was fighting cancer, I prayed the name of Jesus, over and over and over. I couldn't find words to encompass Fred's suffering—or ours. I could not think of what to ask. Was miraculous healing out of the question? What was fair, given all the suffering in the world? What was faithful, given what we believed? We human beings don't always know how God would work in a particular set of circumstances. As I turned into my driveway, I thought about the role of confidence in prayer and the danger of thinking that when God doesn't respond in the way we desire, it means the prayer is unanswered. Those thoughts stayed with me all that day and a year later they come back to me from time to time. Along with gratitude that a brief conversation with someone from another faith tradition helped me reflect on my own religious practice.

In thirty years as a newspaper reporter writing about religion, I had these encounters all the time. For most of those years, I loved my job. Religion was fascinating to me and, as a person of faith myself, I was curious about other people's experiences. At the same time, it was often daunting to reach out to strangers, to ask them to share their deepest beliefs so I could reduce them to print for other strangers to read in a daily paper. But, to my unending surprise, people did agree to talk to me. And often, not always I will admit, but often I came away with more than a story to file on deadline. I came away with a clearer understanding of my own faith and a greater appreciation of a person who had once been a stranger. I retired in 2013 and, apart from the people I used to work with, it is these encounters with strangers that I miss the most. Now I have to be intentional about seeking them out—so I joined the Christian-Muslim group, where I met Faiza.

In the process of creating these opportunities for myself, I've thought about the role of strangers or outsiders in the Bible. In



both Old and New Testament stories, outsiders come from other countries, cultures, or regions. They worship other gods. They have been or are enemies or rivals. They may have political power or wealth. They may be poor or sick. They are all met with a certain amount of distrust, even outright fear. Stranger danger is not a new idea. But within these biblical stories, it's often the strangers who embody the true characteristics of faith, truer than those of the Hebrews, Israelites, Jews, or followers of Jesus that they meet. As insiders ourselves, we need to pay more attention to the examples of outsiders.

Strangers mystify us, but they help us figure out who we are. We human beings define ourselves according to the groups we belong to, and we categorize people outside those groups as "others" or "outsiders." Depending on the circumstances, we separate ourselves into larger and smaller groups: We are Americans. We are members of the upper class, the middle class, or the working poor. We are Democrats, or Republicans, or independent voters, or we don't vote at all. We are Christians, or Evangelicals, or Catholics. As insiders in these circles, we sometimes assume that outsiders are ignorant, hostile, envious, eager to steal or destroy whatever it is we insiders value. We think outsiders are less moral, less thoughtful, and more conniving than we are. When the circle is a religious one, we insiders assume that outsiders are gullible, less faithful than we are, or altogether faithless. Too often we keep our distance out of fear, convenience, a sense of superiority, even ignorance of the outsiders themselves. It's easier to criticize them and elevate ourselves if we don't know much about them or don't think critically about ourselves. We focus on differences, real or imagined, and perceive them as obstacles. We are wary of finding common ground—if we believe that it exists at all. We see evidence of these non-relationships all around us: within our families, communities, countries, religions. But if we are Christians,<sup>1</sup> who value the Bible and its insights,<sup>2</sup> we cannot afford to ignore the biblical stories in which strangers become sacred examples of how to live a holy life. We need to read the stories in which strangers redirect us to the path we thought we had been following all along.

#### 4 *Sacred Strangers*

The notion of hospitality to strangers is central to both the Old and New Testaments. It is a principle that is sometimes repeated as a simple admonition or command. Moses reminds the Israelites, in Deuteronomy 10:19, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." Later, the Christian Letter to the Hebrews (13:2) warns us, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." While it may be easy to forget or ignore such scattered words of advice, the value of strangers is a steady undercurrent throughout Scripture. In these stories, strangers can come alive for us and, perhaps, live longer in our hearts and minds than a simple command. I've chosen half a dozen biblical stories to explore line by line, some with strangers whose names we don't remember or never knew: the magi, whose gifts amounted to more than frankincense, gold, and myrrh; Hagar, an Egyptian slave who named God; Rahab, a hooker (or an honest innkeeper) who did what it took to protect her family; Naaman, an enemy general who listened to slaves and servants; the Samaritan woman at the well, who became the first woman preacher; and the Syrophenician woman, who argued with Jesus and won. There are many others, many of them more famous than some of the passages I have chosen. The story of Ruth comes immediately to mind. Or the Good Samaritan of Jesus' parable. But sometimes, unfamiliarity encourages new understanding, so I've chosen some lesser-known passages. I've relied on the work of scholars, teachers, and pastors I have known or whose work I've read. I've suggested questions for group discussion or private reflection. Endnotes and a bibliography will help readers who want to know more. I've used the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (yes, the tattered copy I dropped at the beginning of this book) for sentimental and scholarly reasons.<sup>3</sup> From here on out, I'll refer to the Old Testament as the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament as Christian Scripture. (I learned in seminary that calling the testaments old and new implied judgments I didn't intend.) And, finally, for the sake of this work, I'll refer to the four gospels by their

traditional names, even though many scholars agree that they are the work of other hands.

It is my hope that reading and thinking about these stories will remind me and encourage readers to seek out strangers, or at least take advantage of the opportunities that life in our diverse country and world offers. My own example, my relationship with Faiza, is a personal one, a minor one, given what is going on in the world today. Religion not only separates people, but it has become the root cause of unspeakable violence. Extremists wage war within and across national boundaries. In addition to the men, women, and children they starve, torture, and kill, these extremists are attacking, or trying to attack, long-held religious convictions that have cultivated peace in times past. One way to thwart the extremist effort is for ordinary people of faith to live out the religious values at the core of their respective traditions. To forge relationships that fly in the face of extremist arguments and challenge their superficial and selfish agendas. To talk about these experiences and urge others to undertake them, too.

It is not easy work. Sometimes these encounters are awkward, uncomfortable, or troubling. In some cases, there may not be much, if any, common ground to stand on. An honest meeting with a stranger may force us to focus on our own failings. But other conversations may be relaxed, thought-provoking, and encouraging. Stilted or smooth, these discussions teach us lessons about ourselves, our faith, other people and their faith. Religion can separate people, but it can bring them together—as it did for Faiza and me. And I believe that while there is work to be done when people of different faiths meet, there may also be time, if we persist in our efforts, to relax and reflect on our own faith. To see what it is we believe, to search out or recover what's missing, to face the challenges that life brings and love demands.



## The Magi, an Unopened Gift

*Matthew 2:1-12*

**A**fter promising in the last chapter to share unfamiliar Bible stories, here I am beginning with one that we modern readers think we know inside and out. We've heard the Christmas story so often that it's easy for us to overlook its details and miss the significance they carry. For starters, there is more than one Christmas story. I taught religion for many years, to high school and college students, and many of them were surprised to discover that the Bible includes two different versions of Jesus' birth. In our memories, we often weave the two tales together and think of them as one story. But reading and thinking about each story, separately, is a good way to begin reflecting on their original meanings. And it paves the way for us to think about what the two passages might mean to us. So, let's begin by asking, who are the outsiders in these Christmas stories?

Luke tells the story in which shepherds watch over their flocks and hear the angelic chorus. In chapter 2 of the gospel, verse 10, "the angel of the Lord" appears to the shepherds and says,

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

When the shepherds hear this message, they set out for Bethlehem to see the newborn for themselves. The shepherds are outsiders, of a sort. They may live outdoors, most certainly outside of town, but chances are they're Jewish, like Mary and Joseph and most of the inhabitants of old Bethlehem.<sup>1</sup> The argument can be made that they are insiders.

The real strangers are in Matthew's story, which does not include shepherds or a heavenly host bearing good tidings. In the Gospel of Matthew, the messenger is not an angel but a star, and it rises east of Judea, far from Bethlehem. The men who see the star and interpret its meaning are not Jews, but strangers known as magi. Within the biblical story, they are the first outsiders who search for Jesus, the first to lay eyes on him.<sup>2</sup> It is their first glimpse that opens our eyes to the Son of God. The magi are models of integrity, humility, determination, and courage. Their examples outshine those of King Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes, whose selfish interest and spiritual ignorance have blinded them to the truth. Bible scholar Raymond E. Brown argues that the true significance of the magi's story is far greater than the twelve verses Matthew uses to tell it. The magi embody "the essence of the good news," Brown writes. God becomes present to us as a child whose life will become "salvation to those who had eyes to see."<sup>3</sup> So, what does Brown "see" in this story about strangers? Vision is the first gift of the magi. It is through their eyes that we readers first see Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Their story begins in Matthew 2:1:

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

The Bible doesn't say explicitly how many magi there are, let alone give them names or even specify their nationality. All those supposed details came later, outside of the biblical text, steeped in centuries of tradition,<sup>5</sup> which often fills in the gaps of Scripture. But in the biblical text, the strangers are described in Greek as *magoi* (singular form of the plural *magos*), a difficult word to translate for modern readers. The word itself is used positively and negatively

in ancient texts to describe mystics, magicians, or outright frauds.<sup>6</sup> Some translations of the Bible call the strangers in Matthew's story "astrologers."<sup>7</sup> We often think of them as "wise men" without giving much thought to the wisdom they actually possess. The Bible does not elaborate. Some scholars consider the magi less than wise. "They seem to know less about what has happened or about what it may signify than anyone else,"<sup>8</sup> Mark Allan Powell writes in his discussion of Matthew 2. But we will come to our own conclusion. Matthew does not refer to the magi by their nationality (or nationalities, if they are from more than one country).<sup>9</sup> He doesn't call them *Gentiles*, a kind of catch-all word used later in the gospel to refer to non-Jews.<sup>10</sup> Matthew describes these men only by their profession: they are magi.

In the ancient world, magi were sometimes respected professionals, consulted by kings and often acted in service to them. Other times, magi were manipulators or charlatans. But in this context, the writer makes no claim, good or bad, about their profession. We don't have to either. So far, we have the barest of bones to work with: These men come to Jerusalem from the East after the birth of Jesus. Once in the city, they seek out Herod, the ruling king of the Jews, and ask him this question:

"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."

Whether we approve of their profession or not, these magi, at least at this point in time, have made their "science" the focus of their lives.<sup>11</sup> They have gathered intelligence from the natural world—a star—and they act on it, even if it doesn't seem to apply directly to their circumstances. They aren't Jews themselves, but they respect the birth of a ruler when it is proclaimed by a star. They are confident enough in their observation and conclusions that they are willing to travel some distance to acknowledge their own interpretation. They use the phrase "king of the Jews." Brown notes that this is the same phrase that will hang over Jesus' head as he is

crucified. It is the only other place outside the stories of Jesus' death and resurrection that the designation is used, Brown writes.<sup>12</sup> It is a title first bestowed by the magi, not by Jesus' own countrymen but by outsiders. The magi go on to use a personal pronoun, referring to the sign they have observed as *his* star. They say they have been aware of the sign since "its rising." They have known of it for at least the time it's taken them to travel to Jerusalem. As is the custom in their time, they associate the star with the birth of an important personage.<sup>13</sup> And they assume that the existing king of the Jews, an insider, probably knows whom they are seeking.

At the same time, the magi don't know everything. They come asking for information. They do not assume or pretend that they are experts, even though they have seen the star early on. And they have a clear idea of what their interpretation of the star's meaning requires of them: They have to find this newborn king and acknowledge his royal birth. They are humble, honest, and willing to ask questions so they can fulfill what they see as their obligation. As outsiders, they're very different from Herod, the insider they are consulting.

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

Now our focus turns to Herod, the man whom the occupying Romans had appointed to rule over the Jews. Of course, he is afraid when the magi mention another king of the Jews, one "born" into this position.<sup>14</sup> Not only is Herod worried, but so is "all Jerusalem."<sup>15</sup> A ruler's fear is shared by the city's population here at the beginning of Jesus' life. The same will be true at the end. Matthew is laying the groundwork for the entire gospel, which will contrast those people who accept Jesus as the Messiah and those who don't.<sup>16</sup> But the foreshadowing is brief. The passage at hand concentrates on the magi and the answer to their question. The chief priests and scribes, who, we assume, know Scripture and its prophecies well, give Herod an answer:



They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

The scribes and chief priests know precisely what the strangers are asking, even though, as religious leaders of the Jews, they don't seem to have taken any action themselves in regard to the prophecy.<sup>17</sup> They repeat it for Herod, who now has a question of his own for the magi:

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

Herod speaks to the magi privately to find out when the birth may have occurred. We can almost hear him doing the math in his head as he plots to kill any child who might turn out to be his newborn rival. Quickly, he enlists the strangers as spies<sup>18</sup> and sends them to Bethlehem, with these instructions:

"Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

Herod asks the magi to "search diligently for the child." He has something more deliberate in mind than a wondrous star shining down on Jesus' birthplace.<sup>19</sup> If we know what's coming, we shudder. He has no desire to "pay homage" to the child. He has evil plans. He does not bother to send anyone with the magi or even have them followed so that he can be sure of killing the right child. He will kill every child born within the last two years. His response to the magi's message that *one* child has been born is to slaughter *many* children. His orders will be sweeping, his violence will be engulfing.

But if we set aside the evil of Herod, if we focus again on the magi and their behavior, we see three things:

The magi are observant, watching and listening openly and honestly. We don't know whether they are suspicious or scornful of Herod. We know only that they hear him out.

They answer his question truthfully. They do not guard their information, even from someone like Herod, whose motives may seem questionable to them.

They pay attention to both natural signs and earthly authorities, to the star and to the acting king of the Jews, to his advisors and to their Jewish Scripture. Later, when the magi choose what or who to follow, they'll do so with their eyes wide open.

After this encounter with Herod, the narrative point of view shifts back to the magi:

When they had heard the king, 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.

Reading carefully, we notice that when the magi leave Herod and Jerusalem, to resume their journey, they catch sight again of the star that had inspired their search. The implication is that they hadn't been able to see it when they were in the presence of Herod. Maybe it could not be discerned from inside the city. In our day, bright lights obscure our sight of the stars. It's when we move into the wilderness that we can see the lights of the night sky.<sup>20</sup> Or, perhaps more likely, Herod's evil machinations have obscured the symbol of hope. Once away from the lights of Jerusalem and the darkness of Herod, the star moves "ahead of them" once again. It's often the case with us that we lose sight of a guiding idea, only to catch sight of it again after we make it past certain obstacles and look for it once more.

For the magi, the return of the star was a happy occasion:

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.

This most unrealistic aspect of the star story is a turning point for the magi. Even if we credit the idea that a star caught the magi's attention, it is impossible to follow one, as they seem to do on countless Christmas cards. But let's not get waylaid by facts here. For the sake of argument, imagine that the magi find the infant not magically by the light of the star, but perhaps more like the process of diligent searching that Herod had in mind. But unlike Herod's, the motives of the magi are pure. The king said he wanted to know the child's location in order to honor him—with no intention of doing so. But for these wise men, finding what they have been seeking makes them joyful. It renews their confidence in their reading of the sign.<sup>21</sup> Matthew underscores their vision: they see the star, they see Jesus. And they are able to respond, to bow before the child. Because they see, we see and we may respond. Maybe the magi are not so foolish after all?

This is the third time the word *homage* appears in the story. It's one we don't use much anymore. In the Bible, homage is a physical act of worship—falling down on one's knees or prostrating oneself as an outward sign of an inner attitude of reverence. It is, in itself, an act of humility, one that many people resist in the modern world. A Buddhist speaker once shocked my world religions class by remarking offhandedly that she was working toward a goal of one thousand prostrations. My students cringed at the prospect of "bowing down" to anyone or anything, let alone doing so a thousand times. But even in our day and age, people of faith *do* bow or prostrate themselves as a physical reminder of their relationship with the divine. The magi, already proving themselves the humble sort, did not balk at what seemed a natural response to a king whose birth was foretold by the heavens.

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts  
of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The fact that the magi bring three gifts may account for us imagining that they were a trio. Regardless, the meaning of the gifts may be more important than their number. In biblical times, gold, frankincense,

and myrrh are among gifts often presented to royalty. So they are in keeping with the magi's motives. Some readers suggest the gifts foreshadow the meaning of Jesus' life. In their thinking, the gold represents the value of his teachings, frankincense symbolizes his connection to the divine, and myrrh, the suffering he will endure.<sup>22</sup> We've already seen that Matthew has used foreshadowing before in this story. He could be doing it again.

It's also important that the magi's gift-giving is not reciprocal. Homage rarely is. "By the payment of tribute, the magi say implicitly, 'You are a king; we are servants,'" Powell writes.<sup>23</sup> From the standpoint of the magi themselves—who, as far as we are told, will not know the adult Jesus, won't hear him speak, won't see his actions, won't mourn his death or, perhaps, won't even hear of the resurrection—these gifts are simply the offerings they deem appropriate to a king.<sup>24</sup> Here, they offer them to an infant, whose power, which is not apparent at the moment, is proclaimed by the star and the prophecy they've seen in it. They are betting on their interpretation of the sign, willing to stake time and a portion of their wealth on their belief that this "born king of the Jews" may not be their own sovereign, but is one worth their reverence. As readers, we have no idea whether this was an ordinary action of these strangers when they encountered royalty, or one that, in a mysterious way, signals a change within the magi themselves. Their outer behavior offers one possible clue as their story ends:

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod,  
they left for their own country by another road.

Even after their encounter with the newborn king, these men are still magi, accustomed to receiving messages in ways that you and I would find mysterious. A dream warns them to avoid Herod on their way home. Trusting in their dream, and perhaps in their own experience of Herod, they continue their journey "by another road." They don't radically change their lives. They don't forget their families, put aside their professions, take up residence in Bethlehem, and wait for Jesus to grow up and, perhaps, follow his lead.<sup>25</sup> They

head home, but they defy Herod. They choose a different route that does not take them through Jerusalem. In at least one, outer respect, their lives have been changed by this experience. The road they travel is a different one.<sup>26</sup>

So what *do* the magi teach us in this story that we so often take for granted? These strangers act with integrity, recognizing that there may be limits to their knowledge or experience. They take risks—physical ones that involve long-distance travel, political ones by posing honest questions to those in power. They listen carefully to other points of view and are not afraid to make critical decisions about whether or not to accept them. They are humble men who value knowledge, their own or that of an alien scripture, and their own best judgment as they weigh Herod's advice. They remain intent on their goals and, by staying true to their course, rediscover the sign that inspired them in the first place. They pay homage, expecting nothing in return. They also pay careful attention to signs, circumstances, and visions. They see the star, they see Herod, they see the star again, see the infant Jesus, see that Herod's plan is evil. They allow their actions to be shaped by what they observe, so much so that they are willing to defy a king and take a different route home. Their commitment is to their vision—to knowledge—not power.

The magi are outsiders in the court of Herod, in the city of Jerusalem, in the land of Judea.<sup>27</sup> But within this story, the outsiders are better role models than the insiders. They are better than the king, who was appointed by the Jews' oppressors and who is ignorant of his people's prophetic tradition, a ruler who fears a rival of stronger standing.<sup>28</sup> They are better than the chief priests and scribes, who know the prophecy and are not watching out for its fulfillment, even when they encounter outsiders who are responding to the prophetic call. The magi are better than the people who fill Jerusalem with fear and unrest at the hour of Jesus' birth and, later, will do the same as he faces his trial and death.

The magi are not insiders. To discover Jesus' birthplace is work for them, Brown observes. The magi must leave home, travel far, learn from Jewish Scripture, and search for Jesus. "Jews who have the Scripture

and can plainly see what the prophets have said are not willing to worship the newborn king," Brown writes.<sup>29</sup> Once the magi find the child, their gifts are more than gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They are humility, integrity, honesty, open minds, critical thinking, a willingness to take risks, to act and to do so in service to others. They are the examples worth following in this particular Christmas story.

When we find ourselves on a mission, when we need direction, when we have the chance to talk to strangers, we need to be humble, honest, and open-minded. We need to share our information and ask our questions if we care about our goal. If the people in authority whom we consult are strange to us, we should still listen to what they have to say and examine their evidence before we resume our journey. If, after we have had a respectful exchange, we need to follow our own wisdom or instincts; then there is no shame in that. But to imagine that strangers have nothing to offer us is as shallow and selfish as the actions of Herod in this story. And our mission, however we imagine it, should be in the service of others, if we are to consider it worthy. If we are able to fulfill it, it may be appropriate that we walk away, without demanding credit or accolades, as the magi returned to their homes. In Matthew's Christmas story, the magi are outsiders. They see what insiders cannot see. They see Jesus, and so much more. They can be our teachers. They are strangers bearing sacred gifts.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Do I act on what I know, taking risks if necessary, or am I sometimes afraid to act? Why?
2. Am I willing to admit, publicly, that there are gaps in my knowledge?
3. Am I willing to ask questions of those in power?
4. Do I listen as others respond to my questions?
5. Am I willing to answer their questions truthfully, without holding anything back?
6. Do I keep my eyes open for signs, circumstances, and visions?