

"Pilgrims on the Road"
(Matthew 2:1-12)
January 2, 2022

Are you a pilgrim, making a long and challenging journey towards a particular place for religious reasons? If you throw this question to the younger generation, you might occasionally hear affirmative replies from some, but most of the time, you might get negative answers. It's not new to state that engaging the younger generation in long-term projects has become more difficult than ever. It seems that they don't have the stamina at all. Is it true, though? Is it true that a long and challenging journey is not for everyone, especially the younger generation who might want to see the journey broken down into tiny pieces? Is it true that a trip aiming towards a particular place is not attractive, especially for the younger generation who prefers multi-tasking and crossovers? Is it true that most people have given up religions and spirituality, and hence, there're no more needs to justify anything for any reason?

The Magi in the Gospel of Matthew are pilgrims living in the old world, a world that is more than two thousand years from now. When the Gospel writer reported their appearance in the story we read today, he highlighted several points about them. Firstly, they were unnumbered, unnamed, mysterious, coming from the East. Secondly, they knew how to decipher the secret of the stars. Thirdly, they were on their way to find the newborn King of the Jews, who was not related to them at all. Fourthly, their question frightened Herod the Great and other Jewish religious leaders. Finally, King Herod was almost successful in using them to get to the source of the threat, the newborn King of the Jews.

The Magi were the ones who devoted themselves to studying stars and linked their mysteries to the future and human destiny. It's not an unusual practice in the Roman Empire, but it's something the Jewish culture forbade (2 Kings 17:16-20). In our story, they were not just the ones who spent their time with their head, being nerds, but put their body, soul, and mind together, engaged themselves in a dangerous journey following a star. They decided to expose themselves to the dangers of being robbed, rejected, and killed. They dared to take the risk because they believed the star they were following would lead them to the newborn King of the Jews, who had nothing to do with them. But that's their passion.

What about Herod the Great? He was a power-hungry person, willing to kill anyone threatening his position, including his wife, sons, and political enemies, or comply with the demands of his political superiors, e.g., Antony, Octavian, as long as he could secure his reign. Even though we don't have any historical evidence to confirm that he tried to kill baby Jesus, such a plot matched his personality very well. He was obsessed with power and was willing to be led by it and played the role of a tyrannical ruler.

And what about the chief priests and scribes of the people? They were well-educated in the Hebrew scripture and Jewish culture. They noticed the most delicate details of all written prophecies. However, they allowed their lifestyles and faith to be dominated by their desire and wish for satisfaction. They were willing to bend over backward to guarantee the continuation of their privileges.

Can we call them all pilgrims then, making a long and challenging journey towards a particular place for religious reasons? The chief priests and scribes had a long-term plan built upon maintaining the Temple cult as their prime concern

and made all possible religious arguments to justify what they were doing. Herod the Great showed his political and religious ambition in his aggressive political actions and the renovation project of the Second Temple. But we can hardly name them pilgrims when we compare them with the Magi.

Do you still remember I asked you to throw the question "Are you a pilgrim making a long and challenging journey towards a particular place for religious reasons?" to the younger generation? Most of them would say no, I said. However, they might all be eligible to be pilgrims if they understand the question from a different perspective. Ask them the following questions, "How did you come into this world"? It's not their choice. "What's the meaning of life, then?" Everyone defines the meaning of life through making choices. "Would your life end?" Absolutely. "Would the meaning of life diminish and finally become meaningless?" Again, it's their choice. It depends on what they pick. We are all travelers, making a long journey not entirely of our choice. That journey will finally come to an end, and we are the ones who might shape how that journey looks like.

Once, a student went to his meditation instructor and said, "My meditation is horrible! I feel so distracted. My legs ache, and I constantly fall asleep. It's just horrible!" "It will pass," said the instructor. A week later, the student came back to the instructor. He said, "My meditation is wonderful! I feel so aware, so peaceful, and so alive! It's just wonderful!" The instructor said again, "It will pass."

In the journey, some find feedbacks vital since they reinforce and motivate. Why did the chief priests, scribes, and Herod the Great keep doing what they were doing? They must have perceived certain feedbacks more critical than the

other. They cared more for what they possessed and what they could exploit further. Their pattern of behavior is more like a tourist than a pilgrim.

A pilgrim is a traveler who believes there may exist a mystery greater than one can comprehend. A faith that justifies opening up oneself and searching for meaning in uncertainties. Think about the situations when we feel tired, run out of resources, have no more energy and idea, and yet like to be enlightened.

A pilgrim is also willing to confess and repent, to let go of things that prevent one from growing. So, instead of craving like an addict, think about the new ways of doing things and living we admire.

A pilgrim is often associated with the figure, traveling alone on dusty roads and forgetting about the inclusiveness of all encountered. Instead, think about how the social circles would look like if we included different groups of people all the time.

A pilgrim dares to travel to that sacred space within the heart, where one can find the caves and dark empty spaces, where one can hear the sound of the silent stream. Just think about how you would transform into when light shines into that space and exposes the pride and prejudice, when warmth enters that space and soothes the suppressed and painful past.

A pilgrim will celebrate when one's weaknesses in human nature get accepted. Think about a broken bowl, the lifecycle of a plant, a human being, a planet, a star, or a galaxy. Accept them as they are. There's a joy and happiness that comes with that.

Are we pilgrims or tourists? As a tourist, there's no need to believe, grow, love, search the soul, and accept what is not acceptable. But as a pilgrim, one

reserves space for believing, growing, and transforming, being lovable and loving, getting healed from within, and accepting one's vulnerability.

The Magi might not consider themselves religious, adventurous, and empathetic, but they were on the right track for further progress. In today's scripture, they were unnumbered, unnamed, with their origins and background unmentioned. However, they made a good impression on most people. Our younger generation might be in the same situation as them right now, unnumbered, unnamed, unmentioned. They can learn from these pilgrims and benefit from the journey if we offer our explanation mindfully and respectfully. Show them how the Magi traveled as pilgrims and finally got home by taking a different path so that our younger generation might also find their journeys a little scary yet fantastic. "Spiritual but not religious" should be used to describe anyone who wishes to believe and live in openness to changes, which includes all of us. Nobody should feel lonely on such a journey. Amen.