

Sermon – The Three Wise Scientists

Rob Keim

January 4, 2026 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

As I begin today, I offer a poem by George Mackay Brown.

*The red king
Came to a great water. He said,
Here the journey ends.
No keel or skipper on this shore.*

*The yellow king
Halted under a hill. He said,
Turn the camels round.
Beyond, ice summits only.*

*The black king
Knocked on a city gate. He said,
All roads stop here.
These are gravestones, no inn.*

*The three kings
Met under a dry star.
There, at midnight,
The star began its singing.*

*The three kings
Suffered salt, snow, skulls.
They suffered the silence
Before the first word.*

In this poem the three kings suffered salt, snow and skulls, but they overcame them. They overcame the elements and mortality to come before the baby Jesus.

Traditionally, we say there are three wise men, but curiously the Bible never tells us the number of magi. Instead, we are told there are three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. By extension we say there are three wise men since there are three gifts, but it could have been two or ten wise ones bringing three gifts. We just don't know.

And traditionally, the three magi are astronomers who are searching for truth. The three magi who visited the baby Jesus are the scientists of two thousand years ago.

They were trying to figure out how the universe works. And, as the poem said they overcame salt, snow, and skulls to find Jesus.

These magi may not have had the scientific method. There was no formulating of hypotheses, via induction, but they were making observations; doing experiments and taking measurements. Scientific method wasn't invented until the seventeenth century. But still, the magi are the scientists of their day.

So, to our embellished traditional images of the three wisemen, I think it is appropriate to layer in the image of three scientists. And, in the twenty-first century the three scientists could be wearing lab coats and safety goggles. I guess they could also be sitting at computers.

Now, I think it is interesting that our traditional Epiphany story depicts the three magi or scientists, as some of the earliest to discover Jesus and some of the first to recognize there is something quite special about this baby.

I think it is interesting because the cultural norm, at least here in the U.S., is that science and spirituality have nothing to do with one another. And, some would even say that science has shown that spirituality is a bunch of malarkey. Some of the latest thinking is that biology and brain chemistry can explain away most spiritual needs and experiences. For some scientists, God has become obsolete or even extinct. And, since God can't be proven by scientific method, then God is not real. This makes me sad that brilliant people can use their logic to dismiss God.

Conversely, for some Christians there is a dismissal of science. For some, if it isn't in the Bible, then it can't be true. For some the creation stories in Genesis are literal truth which means evolution is false. And, the universe is only six thousand years old. It also makes me sad to see Christians at odds with science. It makes me sad for I believe that science and spirituality go hand in hand. They are mutually reinforcing. Our world need science and spirituality to be reunited once again. Our world needs the truth that comes from this union. Or world needs a focus on the universal Christ.

Before the beginning of time the first emanation from God was the Christ, the perfect union of spirit and matter. And, the Christ, this perfect union is throughout all of time and space. The distant galaxies, our Sun, the deepest part of the oceans, all the critters in the jungles of the Amazon, and all people have Christ. All of creation is imbued with the Christ, this perfect union of spirit and matter.

And with this foundation of understanding, science is the exploration of all of those things that are of Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ. Let me repeat that. Science is the exploration of all of those things that are of Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ.

Now, we all have colleagues or friends or family who use science as a reason to dismiss the spiritual aspects of life. This is the first reason I want to re-join science and spirituality. I want to give language to scientists who feel a little beat up by their colleagues who disparage spiritual.

Second, I would like to encourage us to look at the wisdom of the ages – some of it from the books of wisdom in the Old Testament, some of it from the teachings of Jesus, and some of it from the wise men and women who have noticed the ways of the world and the better ways of life.

It can be surprising how observant pre-scientific society has been. Jared Diamond, the best-selling author, of “Guns, Germs, and Steel” wrote another book called “The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?”

In this book “Diamond doesn’t romanticize traditional societies—after all, they had some pretty horrid practices. But he does find great benefit and wisdom in many of their solutions to universal human problems such as child rearing, elder care, dispute resolution, risk, and physical fitness. The wisdom of the ages has much to teach us.

Finally, the re-joining of science and spirituality will allow us to tackle some of our very modern problems, like global warming. The pace of global warming is slow enough that politicians have been able to ignore it or even deny it. They hope that it can be dealt with later. Out of control capitalism is afraid that profits will be reduced because fixing what we have done to the planet will shift wealth. Global warming is a difficult topic and solution that requires science and religion to join together.

Scientists have a long enough view that they can easily decipher the tell-tale signs of global warming. And, with spirituality we take the more long-term view as we look at eternity. Science and religion should be nature allies. News media thinks very short term, sometimes in hours or days. Corporations are guided by short-term profits. Most politicians think short term as well.

However, science focuses on the more long term, and spirituality focuses on the longest term. There can be a natural joining between science and spirituality to recognize what many sages, wise women, and medicine men have noticed. We must take care of our world and work together to end global warming.

Paying attention to eternity mean we need to have harmony between science and spirituality. We need to have a different way of living that stewards the gifts and resources we have been given in a way that leaves our world better than we found it.

Two thousand years ago Jesus was born into our world and was revealed to the shepherds and then the three wise scientists. Imagine a world, two thousand years in the future, in which science and spirituality are united in revealing Christ to us in ways that we can currently scarcely imagine.

Every time science discovers new things then Christ is revealed to us in new ways. So today, see God in everything and everyone around you. See God in yourself as well.