

The Other Wise Man ~ by Henry Van Dyke

MATTHEW 2:1-2 (NRSV) *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “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.”*

You know the story of the Three Wise Men—how they traveled from the East to offer their gifts to the infant Jesus. But have you heard the story of the Other Wise Man, who also saw the star and set out with the others to follow it, but didn't arrive with his brethren in the presence of the young child?

The other wise man's name was Artaban. He lived in Persia: a man of great wealth and learning; a follower of Zoroaster. With his wise companions he had searched the heavens and read the writings. They had seen a new star and watched its alignment with the other stars, and they anticipated a sign of some great event—some royal birth of world-wide significance. As they read the stars and the writings, the birth would happen in Bethlehem. They agreed that Artaban would watch from Persia and the others would observe the sky from Babylon.

On the night he believed the sign would appear, Artaban went up to his roof to watch the night sky. “If the sign appears, they will wait for me ten days, then we will all set out for Jerusalem. I have made ready for the journey by selling all my possessions, and I have bought three jewels: a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl, to present as my tribute to the king.”

As he watched a blue glow appeared between two stars, and rounded itself into a crimson sphere. Artaban bowed his head. “It is the sign,” he said. “The King is coming, and I will go to meet him.”

The swiftest of Artaban's horses was saddled and bridled in her stall, pawing the ground impatiently. As Artaban mounted her back, he said, “God bless us both from falling and our souls from death.”

They began their journey. Each day his faithful horse measured off the allotted portion of the distance, and at nightfall on the tenth day, they approached the outskirts of Babylon. In a little grove of palm trees, Artaban's horse scented difficulty and slackened her pace. Then she stood still, quivering in every muscle.

Artaban dismounted. The dim starlight revealed a man lying in the roadway. His skin bore the mark of a deadly fever. The chill of death was in his lean hand. As Artaban turned to go, a sigh came from the sick man's lips.

Artaban felt sorry that he could not stay to minister to this dying stranger, but this was the hour toward which his entire life had pointed. He couldn't lose the reward of his years of study and faith to do a single deed of human mercy. But then, how could he leave his fellow man alone to die?

“God of truth and mercy,” he prayed, “direct me in the path of wisdom which

only you know." Then he knew that he could not go on. The Magi were physicians as well as astronomers. He took off his robe and began his work of healing. Several hours later the man regained consciousness. Artaban gave him all that was left of his bread and wine. He left a potion of healing herbs and instructions for his care.

Though Artaban rode with the greatest haste the rest of the way, it was after dawn that he arrived at the designated meeting place. His friends were nowhere to be seen. Finally his eyes caught a piece of parchment arranged to attract his attention. It said, "We have waited till past midnight, and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert."

Artaban sat down in despair and covered his face with his hands. "How can I cross the desert with no food and with a spent horse? I must return to Babylon, sell my sapphire and buy camels and provisions for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only the merciful God knows whether or not I shall lose my purpose because I tarried to show mercy."

Several days later when Artaban arrived at Bethlehem, the streets were deserted. Herod was sending soldiers to enforce some new tax, and the men of the city had taken their flocks into the hills beyond his reach.

The door of one dwelling was open, and Artaban could hear a mother singing a lullaby to her child. He entered and introduced himself. The woman told him that it was now the third day since the three wise men had appeared in Bethlehem. They had found Joseph and Mary and the young child, and had laid their gifts at His feet. Then they had gone as mysteriously as they had come. Joseph had taken his wife and babe that same night and had secretly fled. It was whispered that they were going far away into Egypt.

As Artaban listened, the baby reached up its dimpled hand and touched his cheek and smiled. His heart warmed at the touch. Then suddenly, outside there arose a wild confusion of sounds. Women were shrieking. Then a desperate cry was heard, "The soldiers of Herod are killing the children."

Artaban went to the doorway. A band of soldiers came hurrying down the street. The captain approached the door to thrust Artaban aside, but Artaban did not stir. His face was as calm as though he were still watching the stars. Finally his out-stretched hand revealed the giant ruby. He said, "I am waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will go on his way and leave this house alone."

The captain, amazed at the splendor of the gem, took it and said to his men, "March on, there are no children here."

Then Artaban prayed, "Oh, God, forgive me my sin, I have spent for men that which was meant for God. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

But the voice of the woman, weeping for joy in the shadows behind him said

softly, "You have saved the life of my little one. May the Lord bless you and keep you and give you peace."

Artaban, still following the King, went on into Egypt seeking everywhere for traces of the little family that had fled before him. For many years he searched. We see him at the pyramids. We see him in Alexandria taking counsel with a Hebrew rabbi who told him to seek the King not among the rich but among the poor.

He passed through countries where famine lay heavy upon the land, and the poor cried for bread. He lived in plague-stricken cities. He visited the oppressed and the afflicted in prisons. He searched the crowded slave-markets. Though he found no one to worship, he found many to serve. As the years passed he fed the hungry, clothed the naked, healed the sick and comforted the captive.

Thirty-three years had now passed away since Artaban began his search. His hair was white and he knew his life's end was near, but he was still desperate with hope that he would find the King. He had come for the last time to Jerusalem.

It was the season of the Passover and the city was thronged with strangers. Artaban inquired where they were going. One answered, "We are going to the execution on Golgotha outside the city walls. Two robbers are going to be crucified, and with them another called Jesus of Nazareth, a man who has done many wonderful works among the people. He claims to be the Son of God and the priests and elders have said that he must die. Pilate sent him to the cross."

How strangely these familiar words fell upon the tired heart of Artaban. They had led him for a lifetime over land and sea. And now they came to him like a message of despair. The King had been denied and cast out. Perhaps he was already dying. Could he be the same one for whom the star had appeared thirty-three long years ago?

Artaban's heart beat loudly within him. He thought, "Maybe I yet can find the King and ransom him from death by giving my treasure to his enemies."

But as Artaban started toward Calvary, he saw a soldiers coming down the street, dragging a sobbing young woman. As Artaban paused, she broke away from her tormentors and threw herself at his feet, her arms clasped around his knees.

"Have pity on me," she cried. "And save me. My father was also of the Magi, but he is dead. I am to be sold as a slave to pay his debts."

Artaban trembled as he again felt the conflict arising in his soul. It was the same he had experienced in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem. Twice the gift which he had consecrated to the King had been drawn from his hand to the service of humanity. Would he now fail again? One thing was clear, he must rescue this helpless child from evil.

He took the pearl and laid it in the hand of the girl and said, "Daughter, this is the ransom. It is the last of my treasures which I had hoped to give the King."

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky thickened and the shuddering tremors of an earthquake ran through the ground. The houses rocked. The soldiers fled in terror. Artaban sank beside a protecting wall. What had he to fear? What had he to hope for? He had given away the last of his tribute to the King. The quest was over and he had failed. What else mattered?

The earthquake quivered beneath him. A heavy tile, shaken from a roof, fell and struck him. He lay breathless and pale. Then there came a still small voice through the twilight. It was like distant music. The rescued girl leaned over him and heard him say, "Not so, my Lord; for when did I see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did I see you sick or in prison and come to you? Thirty-three years have I looked for you; but I have never seen your face, nor ministered to you, my King."

The sweet voice came again, "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me."

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the face of Artaban as one long, last breath exhaled gently from his lips. His journey was ended. His treasure accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King."

I think we can identify with Artaban's self-doubt—all of us some of the time; and some of us all of the time. Something going on down at the church; a feeling that you ought to be there, but you had school board; or a scout camping trip; or a brother going through a very hard time. I think we need to allow ourselves to see those things as ways of serving the king.

Like Artaban, we sometimes think the only way to serve God is with some religious activity involving a church. The Lord's work is not always accomplished "at the church." It doesn't always need to go through a committee (Thank God!). It doesn't always involve meetings. And it doesn't always follow the lectionary or the liturgical calendar.

It's serving "the least of these." It's holding a sick friend's hand; it's writing your congressman about legislation to provide for the aged and the very young. It's driving half-way across the state to take a mentally challenged young adult to a safe, caring residence.

The face of God most frequently looks like the face of a crying child, or a frightened parent, or strung-out drug addict. It looks like the face of the "least of these."