

Wise Men Still Seek Him

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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

It's a staple of our Christmas celebration and decoration, but it isn't really part of the Christmas story. Most of our Advent art includes the Magi at the manger. We used to set up an Advent tableau with ceramic figures. There was Mary and Joseph and the manger, of course. Shepherds with a couple of sheep. And then three wise men with their camels. They just seem to be a part of the story. In some ways they are, but mostly, they are not.

In fact, the Magi never saw the stable or the manger. They never knelt by any manger. They weren't there with the shepherds and perhaps did not know of any shepherds. The Wise Men come later and are part of a different story. They may be part of the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy to Mary that a "sword will pierce your own soul." It is certain that Mary could not but have been affected by the events surrounding the birth of her child. Even national and imperial events had already impacted her and would continue to do so. But the Magi are part of the story of the opposition to the Messiah, and pre-sage the difficulties Jesus would face, perhaps even including his own death.

One of the things we hear, most often from Christians themselves, is that Christianity is not political but spiritual, and that Jesus was a spiritual deliverer and not political. That is far from the truth. You see, the Messiah, even in prophecy was a political figure. We often criticize Jesus' contemporaries lack of understanding by pointing to their Messianic expectations. I do it, too. They were looking for a conqueror to ride in at the head of a great army and drive out their oppressors. It had been that way since the Babylonian Exile. Along the way, rebels and leaders and arisen with Messianic ambitions. The abomination mentioned in Daniel, the defilement of the temple, was the catalyst for the Maccabean revolt and the short-lived Hasmonean kingdom. Then with Rome and Herod the Great, their Messianic fever increased. The Zealots attempted in a small way to drive out the Romans with terrorism and assassinations. But the interpretations were right in a very important way.

Christianity is inescapably political, for we declare that our allegiance is to God and to God's laws over man's law. For at least the first three centuries, Rome considered Christians a threat to the empire. Even when the Church was a tiny minority, their allegiance to the empire was questioned. To declare that Jesus was Lord was to imply that Caesar was not. The caesars saw the Christian declaration of the lordship of Jesus Christ to be treason, and a threat to their own authority. Christianity is feared as a political menace in the world today, in places like China, North Korea, Cuba and Saudi Arabia, and even in "friendly" places such as India, Mexico and Nigeria. When we declare that Jesus is Lord, we are at the same time declaring that the current rulers are not. "Jesus is Lord" is not just a spiritual condition; it is a political declaration. Thus we cannot separate our faith from our politics, for the one will inescapably inform the other.

Messiah was to set up a new kingdom and that was a threat to the old ones. Herod knew it; the Magi knew it. Their expressed mission was to pay homage to the heir to the throne of Israel. *“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”* Worship here is not a spiritual act, but a political act of honoring the heir to the throne. *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed.* Not because he feared an itinerant preacher, but because he feared a rival to his throne. He feared that a legitimate king would arise to replace him.

Let’s talk about the Magi for a moment. Last week when I spoke of the queen of Sheba visiting Solomon, I told you that Sheba was in the region where Yemen is today, roughly 1400 miles and several months journey from Jerusalem. We aren’t told where the Magi are from, but have assumed that they are from Babylon, where Iran is today. We think they were Persian wise men, but the Persian empire stretched all the way to India. They could have come from much farther than we have thought. So they have faced a very long journey of many miles and many months.

We think they were astrologers, students of the stars. Much like modern astronomers, they charted the stars and were familiar with their paths and constellations. They knew the planets, the phases of the moon, the tides, and could predict solar eclipses. They were watchers, observers of life and nature. Astrology assigns meaning to the stars and to their positions. When a new star appears, it signals some momentous event on earth, perhaps the birth of a royal heir. The Magi determined that the new star appeared in a place they assigned to represent Judea. So when they saw the star, and when they confirmed their observations and interpretation, they began to prepare for their mission - to present precious gifts and pay homage to the heir to the Judean throne.

They would need to purchase appropriate gifts, and to gather supplies for the long journey there and back. They would need attendants, servants, and a regiment of soldiers to guard their precious cargo. They would need sufficient water, food, clothing, cookware, tents, bedding, and all the camels or mules to transport it. It may have taken them several weeks to study the star, and then perhaps several more weeks or months to prepare for the journey. Then they must caravan across the many miles to their destination. It may have taken over a year for them to finally arrive in Jerusalem. And it has been estimated that the entourage consisted of more than a thousand people, a veritable army. That also would alarm Herod. It would also alarm the Romans.

What is interesting to me about this is similar to what has fascinated me about the shepherds and about Simeon. The shepherds heard the angelic message and abandoned their sheep to see the Messiah, their rescuer. It was too important to let anything stop them or stand in their way. They dropped what they were doing and went to see Immanuel, Christ the Lord, God in our midst. The Magi, too, spared no expense in their quest. The birth of Christ, the King of Israel, was far more important than anything else they may have had to do. The miles they had to travel, the time it took them, the expense of it all, were worth it to see this historical event. Who was important enough to deserve his own natal star? They had to see. And they had to bring gifts, the most valuable gifts they could think of.

They go first to Jerusalem, the capitol, the king’s palace, for where else should such a child be born. The sages of Jerusalem direct them to Bethlehem, having found Micah’s prophecy. They

follow the star *until it stopped over the place where the child was. On coming to the house ... they bowed down and worshiped him.* No longer a stable. No longer a manger. Now they have a real place to stay, a house. And it has been at least a year since Jesus' birth. They present their gifts and prepare to return. Herod had asked them to let him know where the child was, but an angel warned them against that, so they snuck out and left by another route, avoiding Jerusalem altogether.

Herod knew he had been tricked, but he was not going to stand for any threat to his power. He calculated from when the Magi told him the star appeared and in an insane rage, ordered the murder of every baby boy under age two in the vicinity of Bethlehem just to be sure he got the one who he saw as a threat. But he failed, because God intervened, warned Joseph and sent the young family to Egypt. Herod died soon after. History tells us that Herod the Great died in 4 BC. That means that Jesus was born at least a year earlier, possible before the end of 6 BC. But here, too, is an example of a singular focus, albeit an evil one. Herod was so focused on keeping his power, keeping his throne, that he was willing to murder as many innocent infants as he needed to, children who, in reality, could never be a threat to him personally. He would be dead long before they were of age. And children weren't his only victims. Others, including a wife and son, were murdered in his quest to hold onto power.

The funny thing is, we call the Magi wise men and the shepherds we call bumpkins. In truth, the shepherds were as wise as the Magi. The Jewish sages who gave Herod and the Magi the place of Jesus' birth demonstrate that they were fools. They knew the place and they knew the quest of the Magi, but they did not go. They weren't even curious. The shepherd heard the angels and immediately went to see. The Magi saw the star and followed from a great distance to see in person what they knew. The point I want to make here is that we are responsible for what we know. We read the Scripture. We know the truth. The wise respond to it; the foolish do not. The wise search out the truth ...

One of the "seven deadly sins" has been labeled "sloth." We interpret that as laziness, but it's really something else. The word is *acedia*. The Oxford Dictionary of the English Language calls it a literary term that means mental sloth or apathy. It's not just physical laziness, but also a lack of curiosity, a lack of interest. Intellectual apathy is the lack of interest in discovery. It is a characteristic of our time, I think. People simply believe what they hear on the news or read in the papers. If it's on the internet, it must be true. People think they already know all they need to know. Then they develop what we call "confirmation bias". They believe what they already know and agree with. They discount new information, especially if it contradicts or disagrees with what they think they already know. They develop a sort of intellectual echo chamber. I see it in the church as well, when someone thinks they know the Bible well enough they don't need Bible study or Sunday School. They've heard one preacher and don't think any other is worth hearing. I often begin a social media discussion only to find that the other party is not interested in knowing more or finding the truth. They name-call, insult, and ridicule rather than search for more or better information. Intellectual laziness is evident in the Jewish sages who gave directions to the Magi. They knew what they knew and that's all they cared to know.

The wise exhibit curiosity. The wise dig deeper. The wise look for research. In fact, I might just shorten that and say that the wise look. Their eyes and ears are open to new discovery. The foolish are satisfied with what they already know. The wise search. The fool is content. The wise hear. The fool closes his ears. The wise gaze upon the stars. The fool closes his eyes.

We credit much of the Proverbs to Solomon. In chapter 2 of the Proverbs, the father attempts to instruct his son: *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding—indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding* (Pr 2:1-6). It is because, he says, *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction* (Pr 1:7). *The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life* (Pr 14:27), where we ought to drink deeply. The fountain runs deep. Curiosity must also run deep. Note the advice to call out, to cry aloud, to search for wisdom as for hidden treasure. Mine for understanding and knowledge. Dig for it as you would for gold. The fear of the Lord is the beginning, but there is much, much more.

Luke commended the Bereans as being of more noble character than those in Thessalonika because not only did they receive the message, but they *examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true* (Act 17:11). They weren't content just to hear; they had to search out the truth for themselves. Your preacher may not always be correct. Search the Scripture for yourselves for the truth and for understanding.

The shepherds were wise, for they were not content to merely hear the angelic message; they sent to see if it were true. The Magi were wise, for they were not content to merely see the star and know it's meaning; they had to see if it were true. The wise today are not content merely to hear or read about. They want to know if it's true. So many people ridicule Christianity – who have never tried it. So many people deny the existence of Jesus – who have not read the stories. So many people today doubt the Bible they have never read. They have been told something and rather than find out for themselves, they simply believe what they've heard. Wise men still search. Wise men still follow stars. Wise men still seek to know God and to know truth.

In this new year, be wise. Seek a deeper understanding and a deeper relationship with Christ.