

22 December 2019

What's the Deal with the Magi?

Matthew 2:1-12

On this last Sunday of Advent we examine another group of witnesses to the miracle of Christ's birth: the magi. We read from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-12:

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ "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." '*

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, '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.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

So today we conclude our series on the witnesses of Christ's birth. We have talked about some who witnessed to his coming before it happened – prophets and angels – and about the first who witnessed the event after it took place – the shepherds. Today? The Magi. Wise men from the East. And as I did when I talked about angels, I think I need to take a few minutes to give some background on who these people were, and who they were not, because, as with the angels, an awful lot of legend has grown up around them over the centuries. First, who were they? Magi were wise men and astrologers of the ancient world. They read the future in the stars and served as counselors to kings and emperors. At the time of Christ's birth, they were probably associated with Zoroastrianism, the religion of ancient Persia. Magi appear a few times in the Book of Daniel, mostly as figures to ridicule. They were among the people who were unable to interpret the king's dream or read the supernatural writing on the wall, setting up Daniel to prove his greater wisdom through the power of his God. But those stories aside, the magi were highly respected scholars and star-gazers, who were believed to have extraordinary insight into heavenly mysteries. Our word "magic" derives from the magi.

Now, what does the Bible say about these particular magi, who followed the star to Bethlehem? You've just heard it. These twelve verses in Matthew are it. There is no other mention anywhere. But lo, how much we have added to the story since Matthew. First of all, at

some point we decided there were three of them. The text never says how many magi there were, only that they brought three different gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Obviously, it doesn't have to have been one gift per magi: there might have been just two, who brought three gifts, or there might have been eight, but five of them brought myrrh. (I don't know. Maybe there was a sale at Bed, Bath, and Embalming Supplies.) Also, somewhere along the line someone decided they were kings. They weren't. They were magi. Magi were not kings, and kings were not magi. But it stuck. In our nativity sets, they always wear crowns to the stable, which by the way is also legend. Matthew doesn't mention a stable; he says they visited Jesus and his parents at "the house." It would appear that they arrived after the family had found a place to live other than a stable. (Wouldn't you?) In fact, it may have been quite some time after the stable. Jesus may have been a toddler by the time the magi arrived. Matthew says that King Herod questioned the magi closely about when the star appeared, and then, when he decided to kill the newborn king, he issued orders to kill every male child under the age of two. And the church legend workshop kept going. By the eighth century, the magi had names – Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar – and the last of these, Caspar, it appears was black. Perhaps from one of the African nations to be found East of Jerusalem. So, our nativity sets give us three kings, one of them with black skin, at the stable, and all of that is pure legend.

Now, I've had some fun with all this, but I don't want to just dismiss the legends. Sometimes legends have more to teach us than history does. But we do need to distinguish between the two. In fact, it's worth asking why there *are* so many legendary supplements to the magi story. Why did *they* get all this further elaboration when the shepherds didn't? There are no traditional names or backstories for the shepherds, and in our nativity sets, they tend to be tucked in the back, kneeling, while the three kings stand up front. In fact, Chris Draxler told me the other day that she had been shopping for nativity sets and discovered that a lot of them don't even have the shepherds. But they all have the "kings." Why do you suppose that is?

The obvious answer is that foreign dignitaries bearing costly gifts is way more impressive to our minds than a bunch of farmhands who brought nothing more than worship. If you had a baby and got visits from a group of part-time fast food workers and from a group of Nobel Prize-winning scientists, which visit would make it into *your* Christmas letter? The magi visit makes the birth of Jesus feel more important. By the way, think about that for a moment. Why do you suppose people might think that earthly VIPs might make the birth of God on earth more significant? Still, that odd notion probably explains why the magi got promoted to kings. You want important? I'll give you important: they weren't just wise, they were powerful!

But now we need to ask the question that we seldom ask, the same question we asked about the shepherds: why? Why did God choose to reveal Christ's birth to these magi, and why is their story included in scripture? What is Matthew teaching us here? Well, maybe to some extent it *is* about the honor shown the Christ by important visitors. That is, maybe in the same way that Luke has shepherds to prefigure Christ's humble ministry to the forgotten of the earth, Matthew has important visitors from afar to indicate that Christ is more significant than any earthly king. That could be at least part of it. But there is at least one more lesson that those of us who have heard this story all our lives might have overlooked. The Gospel of Matthew is widely recognized as the most Jewish of all the four gospels. This is the gospel that quotes from the Hebrew Bible most exhaustively, deals with traditional Jewish customs, presents Jesus' teaching as interpretation of the Torah and the Prophets, and in every way stresses Christ's continuity with Judaism. Matthew is even organized into five parts, which may be intended as a reflection of the

five books of Moses. It is a Jewish book, written by a Jewish author, with a Jewish Christian audience in mind. But in *this* gospel, who were the witnesses of Christ's birth? Some foreigners, followers of a completely different faith.

As I say, from our context, we might not have even noticed that, but I promise you that Matthew's original Jewish readers did, and it was striking. To those readers it conveyed a clear message. Something new was going on. Yes, the Jewish Messiah was born, as prophesied by the Hebrew prophets in the scriptures, but this Jewish Messiah was not what the Jewish people had expected. This Messiah was not just here to save the Jews. That was the Messiah that the Jews of 1st century Palestine were expecting and looking for and dreaming of. They wanted a savior who would drive out the Romans, the foreign devils who oppressed their people. They wanted a Messiah who would establish a new Jewish empire, like the one David had founded a thousand years earlier. They wanted their turn to be on top, again, and for the Promised Land to be theirs and no one else's. But Jesus was not that Messiah. He was a Messiah who came to earth to be greeted with joy by heretics and foreigners. Sure enough, that's who this Messiah would grow up to be. He would be the Messiah who broke bread for Jews *and* foreigners, who brought healing to Jews *and* foreigners, who rejected the exclusiveness of priests and celebrated the inclusive community of outcasts, and who sent his disciples out to tell his story not just in Jerusalem and Judea but in Samaria and to the very ends of the earth. If the shepherds of Luke remind us that the Messiah came for the poor and oppressed, then the magi remind us that the Christ came for the whole world.

By the way, this is why I said earlier that I didn't want to just dismiss the later legends about the magi. No, I don't think any of them are historically accurate, but I do find it fascinating that one of the later additions to the story is that one of the magi was from a different race, with a different skin color. Someone along the line got it – intuitively realized that this story isn't just about how important Jesus was but about how expansive his love is. This Messiah is for everyone, of every race, every nation.

Now of course we know that. This fact is why we Gentiles are even here. We non-Jews have been welcomed to the worship and service of this Christ because God always intended to offer salvation to all. Nevertheless, the lesson that Matthew was teaching his 1st century Jewish audience is still one we need to hear. In every age, the people of God have a creeping bent toward narrowness, a tendency to imagine that we and we alone are God's people, that the miracle of Christmas took place for *our* benefit and no one else's. We draw tighter and tighter circles around ourselves and imagine that we are at the center with Our Personal Lord and Savior. But that's not who this Messiah is. We want a savior who will make all our dreams come true, but our dreams are too small for this savior. This Messiah didn't come to save the good churchgoers, the insiders, the charter members. This Messiah came to be greeted with joy not just by us, but by the gurus and imams and shamans of the world, and if that feels unsettling to you, excellent. That's exactly how the Jewish Christians who first read about the magi felt. This Messiah, this savior, this Son of God, is bigger than we are, bigger than we ever imagined.