

Sunday, December 29, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12
Good News (or not) for the Wise Men: On the Way to Bethlehem
Mark Archibald

There is something I've always found odd about the Christmas story.

It's not the virgin birth, an impossibility that God makes possible.

It's not the chorus of angels greeting the shepherds (what does that even look like?!).

It's not the way the Wise Men are guided to Jesus by a star – a star that does not behave how stars are supposed to behave.

It's the presence of the Wise Men at the infancy of Jesus at all.

The Wise Men, or Magi, studied the stars. They weren't just astronomers. They were ASTROLOGERS! Like the horoscope people. Like theology of gods and deities intermingled with the stars people.

As a kid growing up in a Christian home I knew astrology was part of the list of "Things Not Allowed". Horoscopes were to be avoided. Astrology was up there with Ouija Boards and other occultist practices that you never ever let near your life. This is completely true – we ought to avoid these things!

And yet here the Magi are, consulting stars, discovering the birth of Jesus and traveling to follow him.

These people are well outside the boundaries of being considered God's people – in religious practice and in ethnicity.

And yet they get this invite, specific to them, to come and meet this special child. People that are not Jewish in the least are invited to meet the King of the Jews.

Astrologers would be people that I would disqualify as people fit to come and meet and worship Jesus. They are not remotely on the religious spectrum that any Jewish person would have been.

And yet God seems to meet them where they are at, geographically and religiously, and extend this extraordinary invitation to them. Because God gets our attention in ways that we can comprehend. God comes to us on our level and invites us to follow.

Just an aside about the astronomy/astrology thing: We forget we live in a modern world. Everything is cut up into pieces in our world. Theology goes in this box, science goes in another, politics in yet another box. But this is not how ancient people viewed or experienced the world. It's not how many cultures today experience the world. It is highly doubtful that the Magi separated the science of the stars from the theology and story of the stars. They would look at the stars and see one reality that intertwines the theological and the scientific. They would look at the stars and see the natural and the supernatural interacting together.

And as these astrologers read the stars, there is the overall reality that in this one instance they are being pointed to is Jesus. God meets the astrologers where they are, and God leads them to Jesus.

God steps outside of the religion of the home team, and extends grace far, far, far away to foreigners and outsiders – and they respond! They come!

There is a perceived unworthiness of the Magi. They are interlopers. They are arriving very, very late to the party. The Jews have been very invested in the promise of Messiah for thousands of years! Generations of families would have faithfully followed God, but they do not receive this invitation. Outsiders do.

And yet God gladly invites and welcomes them; at their level of religious experience.

We need to constantly remember that God guides and appears to people in ways that we do not expect. God seems to take joy in operating in ways that we consider out-of-bounds.

God speaks clearly through Scripture. God guides through the Holy Spirit. Yet God also seems to go to very great lengths and use absolutely any means necessary to lead people to Jesus.

In the Muslim world, story after story lets us know that Jesus appears to people in visions and dreams.

Many missionaries have travelled the world to discover cultural and religious symbols that have prepared people for the arrival of Jesus in their lives.

God operates outside of the boundaries of communication that *He has set with us*, and he draws people to Jesus. Much like he drew the Magi to Bethlehem to encounter Jesus.

The Lord God led the Israelites in the wilderness through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In a hauntingly similar manner, God uses a misbehaving star to guide Magi. The Israelites were the “right people” believing “the right thing”. The Magi were not. Yet God was using any means necessary to draw all to Jesus.

When I was pastoring in Fredericton, I would occasionally do services at senior’s care homes. Some people were very sharp and followed along with the service. Others seemed catatonic – present in physical form only.

After these services I would often try to shake hands and give greetings to as many people as possible. Some would respond – many others couldn’t.

I approached one lady that I thought was asleep the whole time we had been worshipping. Immediately she told me, “Our Lord appeared to me in my room.”

She spoke in a very factual way. This wasn’t a metaphysical experience to her. This was reality!

“He was beautiful. I asked him to take me with him, but He said, ‘Not yet.’”

At that moment these were the most plausible words I had ever heard! All that she said lined up with everything I believe and understand about Jesus – His love, His, care, His enduring presence in our lives.

Then she added that Catholic Saint So-And-So appeared to her as well.

Well this cannot be! Her second experience doesn't fit MY beliefs regarding Jesus or MY theology. So it can't possibly be true!

But Jesus us meets us where we are. Jesus speaks to us very plainly through the “proper” channels. But he operates outside of those boundaries, too. Jesus, in his character as the Good Shepherd leaving behind 99 sheep just to save 1, seems to use any means necessary to lead people to Him.

God used any means necessary to lead the wrong people from the wrong culture and wrong religion to Bethlehem to encounter Jesus.

What disqualified people has Jesus been using to get your attention and point you to Jesus and His Word?

Good News (or not) for the Wise Men: The Journey from Bethlehem **Troy Taylor**

The first time I ever went on a vacation to a resort, I recall one particular lady on our flights. On the way down, she was super excited. She was also quite extroverted. We all heard about the songs she would sing, the food she was looking forward to, the drinks she would have, and the dances she would dance. She painted a picture for us of the dream that her vacation was going to be — for several hours.

Her enthusiasm proved contagious, as others began to realize that they were getting off a plane into a dream!

The same woman was on our flight home. Apparently, she was a glass half full kind of lady, because she was continuously sharing about the great fun she had, as well as trying to inspire a continuation of the resort experience in drunken, half Spanish, calling for drinks, inviting others to sing songs, and keep the dream alive.

Response was, shall we say, less enthusiastic than it was on the trip down. Reality was asserting its hold on people returning to their regular lives. They were returning to work, schedules, email, coworkers, and the daily grind of life. How in the world does someone reconcile the idea of paradise and daily life?

I think that this is part of what the magi realized. When they arrived, they are looking for a king of the Jews. So they go to Herod, the current king of the Jews, a man who kills his own wives, sons, and a bunch of little children to hang onto his position. This is the guy that they ask about the one who will replace him as king.

They are brilliant at astrology and astronomy. But not so swift at politics.

Herod sets them on the path of the kingdom of Rome — to identify, and report back on, his competition. Obviously, Herod wants to hold onto his power.

But now they've seen something that they can't unsee. The king of the Jews has been born. His arrival has been announced in the stars above, something only the supreme God of all gods could do. In the cries of a child, the power of every throne on earth shakes, and begins to return to dust. The magi have the invitation to keep living the dream that human wealth, power and privilege offer — Herod can make their lives either very comfortable, or very uncomfortable.

They are returning to people who have no idea that the King of Kings has been born. They return to a country ruled by someone, someone likely familiar with their journey. What do they tell that guy? How will he react? What will their families, friends and community say? What if Herod uses his connections in Rome to pursue them? These men were motivated enough to search out Jesus. Now they've found him, and they face an uncomfortable choice. Keep living in the fantasy that this changes nothing, and go about life as usual, or defy that temptation, and choose a different way.

They choose to go home by another way.

The first people in the world to deliberately choose into the way of God are pagan, Gentile astrologers. They are returning to their lives with the very same problem of my plane full of former vacationers. How can they reconcile what they have seen with their normal, everyday lives.

And this brings me to the third gift, the gift of myrrh. Whichever magus chose the myrrh as a gift is my favourite, because myrrh is a gift with a bit of a prophetic bite to it. Myrrh is a coveted fragrance, useful in celebrations (Psalm 45 and Song of Songs 3:6). But it also is a key burial fragrance, (John 19:39 and Mark 15:23). Matthew is deliberately pointing to the end of the story here.

Tom Wright picks up on this foreshadowing. He says,

“There is another way as well in which this story points ahead to the climax of the gospel. Jesus will finally come face to face with the representative of the world's greatest king — Pilate, Caesar's subordinate. Pilate will have rather different gifts to give him, though he, too, is warned by a dream not to do anything to him (27.19). His soldiers are the first Gentiles since the Magi to call Jesus 'king of the Jews' (27.29), but the crown they give him is made of thorns, and his throne is a cross. At that moment, instead of a bright star, there will be an unearthly darkness (27.45), out of which we shall hear a single Gentile voice: yes, he really was God's son (27.54).”

What is true for the Magi is true for us as well. The birth of Jesus shakes the reality around us to the ground. All of the things that we tend to get distracted by — our paycheck, retirement fund, our own sense of control over our destiny, governments and powers — all of it. Going a different way means

choosing dependence on God over independence or self-reliance, generosity over savings and comforts, discomfort now, so that others might share in the hope of the Son of God.

I want to be clear that everything that we do at this church, as leaders, as members, as volunteers, is so that you can meet with Jesus. So that when you come here on a Sunday, you go home inspired to be different because Jesus is the Son of God. Not just to sit and listen to some nice music and a lecture, but so that life itself changes into something different for you on any day that ends with a Y. I want you to choose in, all the way, and to go home by a different way.

It doesn't matter if you've been following Jesus for seventy years, or if you are still unsure about this whole Christianity thing. I hope that today, you see something that cannot be ignored, that changes how you live tomorrow.

Ultimately, Jesus' birth story is the frame for the picture of his death and resurrection, which saves all of creation from the evil of sin and death. Herod believed that Jesus was a threat to his power, and murdered to hold on to it. The magi believed that he was real enough to defy the global power of the Roman government. A centurion who watched the Light of the World go dark acknowledged the truth. Jesus is the Son of God. And here we see that the Son of God didn't come only to a Jewish story, but to foreign magicians, brutal executioners, and religious leaders alike.

This is our truth, the good, and the bad, the freedom, and the price. Now you have heard it. I am inviting you to believe it. Please do not walk out of here as though it is business as usual. Hold these thoughts in your mind, consider them, and listen for the voice of the living God. I am praying that as you do that, you meet with Jesus, and you choose to go home by a different way, especially if it could be the beginning of your life with Jesus as a Christian. We would love to pray with you, and answer questions you might have about how to do that.