

January 7, 2024

THIS Changes Everything

Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas stories are so familiar, too familiar. They don't surprise us anymore:

- It doesn't surprise us when a woman miraculously becomes pregnant.
- It doesn't surprise when, nine months pregnant, she is refused care.
- It doesn't surprise us when a baby is born in a stable, laid in a feeding trough.
- It doesn't surprise us when angels appear to shepherds, the dregs of society.
- It doesn't surprise us that all the Jewish scholars and priests, eagerly watching and waiting for the Messiah for centuries, completely miss His birth.
- And it doesn't surprise when these guys show up ...

Would it surprise us if, on January 7, 2024, the leading Iraqi or Iranian cabinet ministers suddenly were to arrive in Jerusalem, unannounced, asking Prime Minister Netanyahu, *"Where is the newly elected prime minister of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."* Would we be surprised? Absolutely.

Shortly after Jesus' birth, "Magi" arrive in Jerusalem, asking, *"Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."*

The "Magi" are from the neighbouring Parthian Empire, rivalling Rome in size and power. They are not "kings" (alas for the popular carol), but are the nobility, inner cabinet, "House of Lords," advisors to the King of Kings in Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital, near modern-day Baghdad. They are the kingmakers (and occasionally king-breakers) in the Empire. They are the legal beagles responsible for the "law of the Medes and Persians that cannot be revoked" (Daniel 6), from whom we get our word "**magistrate**." FYI, we have no idea how many of these Parthian/Iraqi/Iranian lords arrived in Jerusalem, only that they bring three kinds of gifts.

Magi are also priests of Zoroastrianism, the common religion in the Parthian Empire. In Zoroastrianism there is one good, supreme creator, Ahura Mazda, who is constantly at war with Angra Mainyu, an opposing, destructive spirit. At the end of time a saviour-figure would bring about the ultimate victory of good over evil. The Magi studied the stars for signs of the coming of this saviour. Magi were renowned for their wisdom (Daniel, able to interpret dreams, is described as chief of the magi in Daniel 4:9, 5:11).

Can we begin to imagine the surprise – and the upheaval – when these foreign lords arrive in Jerusalem, with a retinue of guards, retainers, and servants. Surprise. They are asking about a "King of the Jews," and they don't mean Herod. Surprise!

The Magi would assume the birth of this King would be the talk of the town. All Jerusalem should be buzzing with the news. But no one knows anything. Surprise!

While the Magi should receive a state welcome with all due pomp and circumstance, instead – surprise! – Herod meets with them secretly.

Bethlehem is only 10 kilometres from Jerusalem. But none of the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the law bother to go and see. Surprise. Herod can't be bothered to send even a servant to check things out. He sends these visitors, the Magi. Surprise.

It's the Magi, with all their retinue in tow, who make the short journey. And when these great lords, these kingmakers, find the Child and His mother, they "bow down" and "worship him" (Matthew 2:11).

God only knows how these people knew about the birth of a new King of the Jews. God only knows how this mysterious star appeared. God only knows why they left their comfortable palaces, travelled 1000 kms, across the desert, risking both (1) the wrath of their King – you don't just go on this type of visit without official permission – and (2) a nasty reception in the enemy, Roman Empire – you don't just show up in a foreign capital with your soldiers and servants. God only knows why they were willing to give VERY valuable gifts, of their own personal wealth. But they did.

- The first people to recognize Jesus as *"the Saviour – yes, the Messiah, the Lord"* were shepherds, the lowest of the low, outcasts in Jewish society (Luke 2:8-16).
- The next people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah/Christ/God's Anointed One are not even Jews, but foreign lords, priests of a totally different religion.

Herod? Nowhere to be seen. The chief priests and teachers of the Law – experts on Jewish religion? Missing in action. The residents of Jerusalem? Bethlehem? The shepherds had *"told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished"* (Luke 2:17-18). But no one took them seriously. No one cared.

After the visit, the Magi, and their caravan, *"returned to their own country by another way, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod"* (Matthew 2:12).

On the one hand, they simply choose to avoid Herod, going by a different road.

On the other hand, there is a not so subtle deeper, spiritual meaning here, too. They have met Jesus – the true King of Kings, the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord – Jesus/God-saves – Immanuel/God-is-with-us. They are going home by another "way/road/route" spiritually as well. They are not the same people who left Ctesiphon many days or weeks ago.

Somehow, in some way, God's Holy Spirit leads the Magi on a journey – geographically, but also spiritually – so they now find themselves in a new place, on a new road, physically and spiritually ...

It's interesting to think about the concept of "journey" – geographically and spiritually.

Think back to Saturday, January 7, 2023. Can you remember it? I honestly can't remember the exact day. But I can remember looking ahead to 2023. We had certain ideas, plans, hopes, dreams, expectations, and goals for the year.

Today is Sunday, January 7, 2024. I'm looking back on the year. 2023 didn't turn out much at all like I had planned, hoped, dreamed, or expected. There were a lot of surprises. It was quite an – unexpected – journey.

The Magi's year is going to be like that. The Zoroastrian New Year begins on the spring equinox, March 21 on our calendars. On the previous March 21, I wonder what each of the Magi were planning, hoping, or expecting for the year ahead. A year later, after God spoke to them, guided them, and changed them? There were a lot of surprises. It was quite an unexpected journey. They were changed people. They had met Jesus.

In Tolkien's classic, *The Lord of the Rings*, a wise, old hobbit, Bilbo, says to his nephew, Frodo, *"It's a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road, and if you don't keep your feet, there's no knowing where you might be swept off to."*

Unless we're content to stay indoors forever, we will find that when we step onto the road of life, we may get swept into unexpected places and unforeseen experiences, too.

So ... I wonder, on Tuesday, January 7, 2025, where will we be? What will have happened? We have our plans, dreams, hopes, expectations for the year, and ... life will happen. There will be surprises. It will, quite possible, be an unexpected journey.

The question is: How will I handle it when life goes sideways? How did the Magi handle the unexpected journey?

1. **Before the Magi even know Jesus, God is with them.** This, in itself, is God's amazing grace in action. It's also part of the story my journey. The only reason I came to faith in Jesus at all is that, before I believed in God – in fact, while I was still a committed non-believer in God – His Holy Spirit spoke into my heart and patiently, lovingly – relentlessly – hounded me until I came to faith. God is at work in your life, whether we realize it or not. And God is at work in the lives of the people around you, whether we realize it or not.
2. **They step out in faith. Each step of the way, God is with them.** They follow a star. Does that seem normal to you? Not really. Do they know where

they are going? Not at all. Do they follow? Yes. I don't now what this year will bring in my life. God may give me specific nudges. Things may happen. Crises may come. Do I have any idea where this is all going? Not at all. Will I follow? Will I keep putting one foot in front of another, following God's Spirit? I hope so.

3. **They meet Jesus. They allow Jesus to change everything.** They meet Jesus. They meet the genuine Saviour. The real King of Kings. The Magi are challenged to change their entire understanding of God, life, the universe, and everything. Will they do that? Of course, they do. They step onto a new road. And they follow it. They will go through life in a new "way." They follow the true Saviour, King, and Lord.

Thirty-plus years later, many people are following this new way, the way of Jesus. They, too, have met Jesus. That changed everything. They don't call themselves "Christians." That was a word the Romans coin to label people who talk about and follow the way of Jesus, the Christ (Acts 11:26). "Christian" is a good word. Jesus, the Christ/Messiah, is the centre of our faith. But it's a **passive** word. It describes our key belief. But it can imply that, if you once "make a decision for Christ," you're now a "Christian." That's it. Done. Finished. You're "in" the Kingdom. Now you can go back to your old, normal life, with the assurance that, when you die, you'll go to heaven. The word "Christian" doesn't say anything about what He means for my life, now. We all know people who call themselves "Christian" who live ... well, who don't live it out.

These people met Jesus, in person or through His Spirit. They **describe themselves** as "followers of Jesus" or "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:1-2, 22:4-5). This is a **dynamic** term, an **action** phrase. Yes, you believe in Jesus, but, because you've met Jesus, you try to follow Him every moment, every day. Your old, normal life is over. Now you're living a new life, trying to live in and follow Jesus. *"Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience,"* Paul writes. *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity"* (Colossians 3:12-14). You're living "in the Spirit."

Whether you know it or not, God is with you, right now. He will be with you, every step of the way, no matter what happens in 2024. Will we step out in faith? Will we follow?

Genuinely meeting Jesus changes everything. What will it mean for me in 2024, if I think of myself as a "**FOLLOWER of Jesus**" at home? Work? School? In the community? How might that change how I think, act, speak?