

“Christmas: The Rest of the Story”

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Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Today we look at the rest of the Christmas story – one that gets rolled into a familiar narrative but is really a separate story of faith – the coming of the wise men. This is a strange story, but we have heard it so often it no longer captures our imagination as perhaps it should. It is remarkable to me that it shows up in Matthew’s account of the gospel. Here is the one gospel written from a distinctly Jewish point of view, but the Christmas story Matthew tells is all about how the first Gentiles came to worship Jesus. Matthew makes no mention of the shepherds, the innkeeper, and all that heard the story and “wondered” as Luke put it. While tradition has filled in the gaps, the story of the wise men (or wise guys as the children’s pageant called them!) lacks details and certainty, but Matthew used it anyway. That tells me what a powerful part of the Christmas narrative this story was to Matthew and to the Jews who saw Jesus as more than just a Jewish messiah.

Facts vs. Myths

Who were these wise men? As we study the scripture we find that there are a lot of questions we cannot answer about the wise men from the Biblical text. For example: How many were there? We don’t know. Where did they come from? We don’t know for sure. How long did their journey take? We don’t know. They seem to just show up mysteriously – and just as mysteriously they are gone. They likely came from what was then the Medo-Persian Empire (part of that empire is the modern country of Iraq) over deserts and mountains. Their journey took months. There was likely an entourage of 30 or more people, camels, and supplies for the long trip, even if there were only three principle travelers. So (with apologies to Hallmark) we know that the modern nativities showing everyone at the manger are just scripturally incorrect. Even Matthew says they came to the “house” where the young child was.

These “magi” were into astronomy, astrology, mathematics, history, and very skilled in sorcery and divination. Magi is where we get our word “magic” today. The history of Magi goes back to the Old Testament several hundred years before Jesus. Daniel 2:1ff says that King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream, and there were wise men who were asked to interpret the king’s dream. Well, the way the rest of the story in Daniel goes is that none of the wise men could interpret the dream, causing the King to get upset. He orders the execution of these wise men (v. 12). But God had given Daniel the interpretation of the King’s dream (v. 24), so the King put Daniel over the whole group of wise men (v. 48). Eventually, these wise men would embrace Daniel’s God because of Daniel’s godly leadership.

The Wise Men made their way to Bethlehem and found Jesus and his parents in a home. There they performed the second act of worship to this King of the Jews (the first being the shepherds). They knelt before him, and they worshiped him. Then they offered the first recorded gifts to Jesus. Gifts worthy of a king. Gold for royalty, Frankincense for priesthood, and Myrrh for sacrifice and death. Gifts of great value. From there the wise men made their way back home, avoiding Herod as to save the life of the child, as they were told to in a dream.

I wonder what these wise men were thinking. What they might have been expecting as they found the new King of the Jews. I can imagine they were surprised to see how

humble he was living. How unceremoniously he lived and how uncelebrated he was. Just a normal child in a normal home. Yet they believed. They could have easily said, "This can't be what we thought it was" and gone back home. They still believed. They still gave gifts, they still worshiped Jesus. Here we are over 2000 years later. Still worshiping, still offering gifts, still in awe and wonder over this child. After a brief stop at the palace in Jerusalem, a place where you would expect to find a new born king, they made their way home another way. So what can we learn from them?

A Journey of Faith

What would prompt someone to leave the comfort of their homes to go on a dangerous journey? Romance? Yes. Wealth? Most definitely. But faith? Yes – faith. "Where is He who has been born the King of the Jews?" What a probing question – there is no doubt in their minds that he had been born – the question is "Where is he?" They had seen the star – the evidence was real – now where is he? They had faith that he was alive – that he existed – now all they needed to do was to find him. Their purpose was established – find him. And so they were willing to risk everything to find him. They were willing to leave the safety of their homes – to risk a perilous journey to seek a King. Can you imagine their neighbor's reaction? "Are you going on a journey?" "Yes." "Where are you going?" "We don't know." "How long will you be gone?" "Well we're not quite sure about that either." "How far is it" "We don't know that either." "Boy for wise men you sure don't much do you?"

God's journeys always involve faith. Ironically, these foreigners had more faith than Jesus' own people. It's impossible to please God apart from faith. Why? Because anyone who wants to approach God must believe both that he exists and that he cares enough to respond to those who seek him. People of faith have been willing to respond to the challenges of the unknown over and over again down through history. We are no different here today.

William Cary was a shoemaker when one day he heard of the millions of people in India who had not heard the good news of Jesus Christ. He believed the great commission to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel." He believed that that verse was speaking directly to him. So he volunteered to go to India but was told, "Young man, sit down. When God wants to convert the heathen, He will do it without your help." Cary went anyway – supporting himself. For seven years he worked without seeing a single convert – but by the end of his life he saw hundreds of churches and thousands of converts. Today he is known as the "Father of Modern Missions." He was a man of faith.

A Journey of Worship

When the wise men came on their journey it was for the purpose of worship. They brought with them gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts have a lot of symbolism associated with them. Gold represents wealth and royalty. It is a gift fit for a king (Jesus was the King of Kings). Frankincense is the sap of a tree that was dried and hardened and used as incense to worship God by the priests. Thus we see a gift for his deity and priesthood (Jesus was the Son of God and our great High Priest interceding for us.). Myrrh is a fragrant perfume that was used to anoint the dead – to embalm and preserve them (Jesus was to become the Sacrificial Lamb). But there is more to worship than gold, frankincense, or myrrh.

Worship always involves sacrifice. Was there a price to be paid for the wise men's worship? Yes. They had committed themselves to a journey. Travel in those days was not very comfortable – in fact it could be extremely dangerous. The wise men had

sacrificed their own comfort to find the king and worship him. Listen to what David said about sacrifice: "I will not offer to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost [me] nothing." (2 Samuel 24:24)

Paul says it this way in Romans: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." (Romans 12:1)

True worship requires sacrifice. The greatest gift – the greatest sacrifice – you can give to God is yourself. You say but I have given nothing to him today. Even today you have given him something of yourself. You have given him your time by being here. You prepared for a journey this morning by getting up and getting dressed and ready to seek a King. You got into your cars, used your gas and came to church. Some of you when the offering plate came around put money into the plate to help pay kingdom expenses both here and around the world. When you came today, you came as a living sacrifice – even though you may not view it as that – even though you may not have realized it. The effort you make to worship God is a personal sacrifice to him.

Remember that what God wants most, above every thing else, is you. He wants your heart – he wants your attention – 24/7. The question to ask is: What am I willing to give him? Am I willing to give him my best? Am I willing to go on a spiritual journey to worship him? Am I willing to give up my comfort zone to follow Christ? The wise men were – are you?

A Journey of Change

Look at verse twelve with me: "Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way." Isn't it interesting that after they worshiped Jesus that they could not go back the same way that they had come? I find that to be true even today. Once you have met God, you will never be the same. An encounter with God changes things – it changes you – doesn't it? It's always been that way. Jacob wrestled with God and never walked the same the rest of his life. Isaiah stepped into the presence of God and proclaimed "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The Lord of hosts." Isaiah 6:5. He was never the same again.

Job questions God over and over again concerning his suffering, and when God shows up Job says. "I'm speechless, in awe—words fail me. I should never have opened my mouth! I've talked too much, way too much. I'm ready to shut up and listen." Job 40:4-5 (MSG) Job met God and became a changed man. That is what happens when we walk into the presence of God. We are changed. That is what happened to the wise men when they encountered Christ – they were changed. That is what happens when we encounter Christ – things become different.

Why were these travelers wise? Not because they knew all the answers. They were wise because they had faith; they were wise because they worshiped; and they were changed forever – all because of a child. How about you? Why did you come? Are you looking for a change in your life? Find Christ this Christmas, and I can guarantee that you will be changed. Things will be different. Step out in faith and seek him as these wise men did.

Prayer

Notes:

Notes on the Wise Men or Magi: Not much is known about these visitors other than what Matthew records in the first book of the New Testament. We know they were from the East and studied the stars. We also know that they had some knowledge of the history and prophecies concerning Israel. They followed a star to Bethlehem, but contrary to the popular Nativity scenes, they probably arrived a year or two after Jesus' birth. Note Herod had all children in Bethlehem under the age of 2 killed hoping to end the life of the young King. He must have had reason to believe that (1) they were still in Bethlehem, and (2) he likely was older than an infant.

There is no mention of the number of wise men, although it has been assumed that there were three based on the three gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh. Religious tradition has even given them names: Balthazar, Caspar (or Gaspar), and Melchior.

We do know for a fact that wise men came and worshipped Jesus. It was an important enough event for Matthew to add it to his account of the birth of Jesus. This was God announcing his long-awaited son's arrival on the earth to the Gentile world. And it provides further confirmation of God's universal love.

Important events of the Christmas season include:

Advent - (11/28-12/24) Preparation for Christ's arrival.

Christmas Eve - (12/24) The Night Before Christmas.

Christmas Day - (12/25) Celebration of the birth of Jesus.

The Twelve Days of Christmas - (12/25-1/5) Twelve days starting on Christmas and ending the day before Epiphany, January 6.

Epiphany - (1/6) Also known as Three Kings' Day celebrates the visit of the 3 wise men.

[Matthew 2](#) - Visit of the Magi and escape to Egypt.

Read the Old Testament prophecies related to the rest of the Christmas Story – the visit of the Magi.

[Micah 5:2](#) - Bethlehem would be the birthplace.

[Psalm 72:10-11](#) - Kings will present him gifts.

[Jeremiah 31:15](#) - The massacre of Bethlehem's children.

[Hosea 11:1](#) - The escape to Egypt.