
Our text for today is a fascinating story from the gospel of Matthew

Everybody knows this story - from Christmas cards, and Christmas carols...

Matt 2.1–3 NIV After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "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." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

We three kings of Orient are... you remember that old carol?

There's a wonderful painting by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo...

But as you can see from the text, the details simply aren't the way the carol or the painting depict

There weren't three, and they weren't kings, and they weren't from the Orient

So... apart from that, we're good...It's a wonderful Christmas carol, and we absolutely ought to keep singing it

So what actually went down? Let's work our way through the text

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, an insecure narcissist named Herod was King over Israel

Herod wasn't Jewish by birth... he was Idumean, from a land to the south of Israel called Edom

And because he wasn't Jewish, Herod ruled in constant insecurity, knowing that he really wasn't a legitimate king of Israel

And he took any threats to his kingship very seriously indeed

He had his wife and three of his sons killed because they made him feel insecure

And now these Magi arrive, looking for the newborn king of Israel

You can understand why Herod was disturbed...

And when Herod was troubled, everybody was disturbed... because there was no limit to what Herod would do to keep himself safe

So ... who were these Magi, anyway? What do we know about them?

The Magi ...were an order of priests from Persia – modern day Iran

They were high-priests of an ancient Persian religion called Zoroastrianism... or Mazda-ism (do you own a Mazda?)

You're familiar with these kings from the OT - Nebuchadnezzar & Cyrus & Darius, right? Well, they were Zoroastrians

There's an inscription on Mount Behistun in Iran, from the time of King Darius, around 500BC, which mentions the order of the Magi

So... the question then is this: what were these high-priests of Zoroastrianism doing at the birth of Jesus, right?

To answer that question, let's take a quick look at their essential beliefs

In very simple terms, Zoroastrians believe that there is one great creator God who is completely good, and brings light, and order, and goodness, and harmony to all creation

And against this One God is an opposing force of darkness, of evil, of chaos, and disorder... and we live in the midst of the battle between these two

And - here's where it gets real interesting: they look forward to a Messiah, the Saoshyant...

Who will come one day and overcome the forces of disorder & chaos & evil, thereby bringing peace & goodness & order to all the world

And this Saoshyant, this Messiah who is to come, according to their tradition, will be born to a virgin...

Now isn't that interesting?

There's a fascinating bit in Acts 14 which is super-relevant to our reflections here

Barnabas and Paul are explaining Jesus to the Greeks - worshippers of Zeus and Hermes, and the entire Greek pantheon

Acts 14.14–17 Barnabas and Paul .. [said]: “We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them. In the past, he let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without witness...”

God has not left himself without witness in all the world

In every culture, in every religion... there are traces and echoes of the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...

And hints of Jesus the Messiah, who is to come and overcome evil

There's all kinds of weird and disturbing stuff, for sure, in the many religions of our world

But embedded within are pointers to the One True Creator God revealed to us fully and finally and comprehensively in Jesus

Paul was particularly skilled at connecting the dots for those among whom he preached the gospel

You remember what he says in Athens, in Acts 17?

Acts 17.22–23 NIV Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.”

And then, beginning with this amazing opening, Paul explains Jesus to the Greeks

You see something similar in the story of King Darius, in Daniel 6

King Darius is Zoroastrian, of course

And Daniel is Jewish, worshiping the One true God of Israel - Yahweh - and he is living in exile among the Persians, who are all Zoroastrians...

But Daniel refuses to worship any God but the God of Israel, and for that crime, he is thrown into a den of hungry lions

But Daniel's God, the God of Israel, protects Daniel from the lions

And when King Darius sees the power of Daniel's God, he realizes that Daniel's God is the true God

Dan 6.25–27 NIV Then King Darius wrote to all the nations and peoples of every language in all the earth: "May you prosper greatly! I issue a decree that in every part of my kingdom people must fear and reverence the God of Daniel.

"For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth. He has rescued Daniel from the power of the lions."

Darius had a Zoroastrian understanding of this one great Creator God

But now in Daniel's witness, he discovers that the god that he'd been worshipping in ignorance is the God of Daniel, the God of Israel...

And now he declares to all his kingdom - the God of Daniel is the living God, who endures forever, whose kingdom will not be destroyed, whose dominion will never end

Now Darius doesn't become Jewish - rather, his eyes are now opened to the truth that the God he had been worshipping in ignorance is actually the God of Israel...

Does that make sense?

And Darius, of course, is hugely instrumental in ending the exile of Israel, and rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem

So many amazing connections... with God at work through all of it

In 1962, a young Canadian couple named Don and Carol Richardson moved to Papua New Guinea to bring the gospel to the Sawi tribe

They were in their mid-twenties at that time

The Sawi were cannibalistic headhunters

They were constantly at war with each other

And they deeply valued deception and treachery, and had no use for honesty

When they heard the story of Judas betraying Jesus, for instance, they thought Judas was the hero in the story - the smart one

Don and Carol simply could not find a way to connect the gospel of Jesus into such an alien and complex culture...

Until something amazing happened... watch this **VIDEO**

God has not left himself without a witness... has he?

Don Richardson wrote a wonderful book about his experience

The Peace Child ... and another, **Eternity in Their Hearts**

God has not left himself without a witness

So now let's go back to the Magi... these priests of Zoroastrianism

You remember I mentioned that Zoroastrianism contains this prophecy of a Messianic figure, the Saoshyant

...who will come one day and overcome all the forces of disorder and chaos and evil, thereby bringing peace to all the world, forever

Where did these Zoroastrians come up with this prophecy?

Well, we get a crucial clue when we discover that the tradition of the Magi goes back to an OT character named Balaam

You may remember Balaam, and the talking donkey? Well, the tradition of the Magi traces their origin back to Balaam

So when we go back to the Bible, and consider the story of Balaam, we discover that this Zoroastrian expectation of a Messiah who will come out of Israel - comes right out of the Bible, from the Torah

It turns out that this prophecy goes back a very long way, back to the time when Israel came out of slavery in Egypt...

We pick up the story in Numbers 22

Num 22.1–3 NIV Then the Israelites traveled to the plains of Moab and camped along the Jordan across from Jericho.

Now Balak son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites, and Moab was terrified because there were so many people. Indeed, Moab was filled with dread because of the Israelites.

So the people of Moab are terrified of Israel...

And so, they turn to a local sorcerer, a magician... for help

And they ask him to curse these Israelites...

Balaam is clearly seen in the text as a man of power, who is able to bless and curse others

Balaam is not Jewish... he's simply a local Canaanite sorcerer

He has no connection with the God of Israel - until this moment

He's simply a hired gun - hired to curse the people of Israel

But then the God of Israel visits him in the night, with a word for him

Num 22.9–12 NIV God came to Balaam and asked, “Who are these men with you?”

Balaam said to God, “Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent me this message: ‘A people that has come out of Egypt covers the face of the land. Now come and put a curse on them for me. Perhaps then I will be able to fight them and drive them away.’”

But God said to Balaam, “...You must not put a curse on those people, because they are blessed.”

So God stops Balaam in his tracks

And then God tells Balaam what he must say, instead

So now that Balaam has actually encountered the true God, he gives up on his sorcery, and instead waits to hear from God

Num 24.1–19 NIV Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not resort to divination [sorcery/magic] as at other times, but turned his face toward the wilderness. When Balaam looked out and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe, the Spirit of God came on him...

Then he spoke his message: “The prophecy of Balaam son of Beor, the prophecy of one whose eye sees clearly, the prophecy of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened:

“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.... A ruler will come out of Jacob...”

This is one of the earliest prophecies of the Messiah, and it comes to us through this pagan sorcerer named Balaam

Num 24.17 NIV “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.”

And this prophecy becomes part of the tradition that Balaam passes on to his own people... who eventually become the Zoroastrians

And in some versions of the tradition, Balaam himself is the founder of Zoroastrianism

And Balaam himself is seen as the first of the Magi, in the tradition

And this prophecy becomes a part of Zoroastrian belief, and part of what the Magi passed on

That a Messiah would come, and he would come as the King of Israel... a star would come out of Jacob, a scepter from Israel

Remember what Paul and Barnabas said in Acts 14? Our God has not left himself without witness, in all the world...

And so, 1300 years later, when Jesus the Messiah is born, God reveals this to the Magi, in Persia - through a star

The Magi have held on to this prophecy, this tradition, this hope... all the way from Balaam 1300 years ago

And now when God reveals to them that the time has come, they drop everything and travel several hundred miles to come worship the Messiah, the newborn King of Israel, who they believe will overcome evil and bring peace to all the world

God has not left himself without a witness, has he?

And then they run into Herod

Who is anxious to find out more, because if this is true, then this child is a threat to be disposed of

And so he calls together a council to figure it out

Matt 2.4–6 NIV When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”

And they turn to a word given to the prophet Micah, which tells them that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem

Matt 2.7–8 NIV Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

So Herod sends the Magi to Bethlehem, so they could locate this child - so that Herod could destroy the child

But God is still working it all out, of course

Matt 2.9–11 NIV After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They brought the best of what they had as gifts, as offerings

Gold - as is fitting for a King, according to the tradition
Frankincense - to worship the Son of God
And **Myrrh** - for the one who would give his life for the world

Well, there’s much more to the story that we could explore, but for now let me conclude with a few observations

We are preparing to celebrate the birth of our Messiah Jesus

To celebrate Jesus is to welcome him fully, to trust him utterly, and follow him faithfully

When we are faced with Jesus, there are three options, and this story brings all three to us

First, we could see Jesus as a threat - to be done away with, to be ignored, to be destroyed - as Herod did

Second, we could see Jesus as interesting, to study, to discuss, to debate, to contemplate... and then do nothing about it - as the scribes did

Third, we could do all in our power to go after him, as the Magi did

I pray we follow the Magi's example

Jesus is an unbelievably precious gift to us... Imagine our condition if he hadn't come to us

John 3.16–17 NIV For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

A final thought: our God has not left himself without a witness

This means that there is not a single heart, a single community, a single nation, a single people, a single religion - that does not contain the echoes of the witness of our One True God

And we are sent... to take the gospel of Jesus into all the world...

There are those around you, in your world right now - a neighbor, a friend, a colleague... in whose heart God is already at work, to prepare them for Jesus... I pray you would sense this, and move outward with the gospel of Jesus, with love, and sensitivity

Perhaps there are some here today who might sense a calling to take the gospel of Jesus to those who have never heard of Jesus

I pray you would sense the sending of the Spirit this moment...

VIDEO
