

THE WISE MEN, HEAVEN-SENT VISITORS

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By Pastor Stan
Matthew 2:1-12

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INTRO.

-- We're just getting started this month in a series through the first book in the NT, the Gospel of Matthew. Today we come to one of the best-loved stories in this Gospel - the visit of the Wise Men. This might be the first time that you have heard a sermon about the Wise Men in the summer. I don't think I have ever preached a sermon about the Wise Men during the summer before today. But looking at the story of the Wise Men at some time other than December is actually more appropriate than you may think. Although we typically picture the Wise Men arriving at the stable the night Jesus was born, the reality is that they arrived in Bethlehem some time later - perhaps, more than a year later. Indeed, as we are going to see, the Wise Men find Jesus not in a stable but in a house.

Cf., Matthew 2:1-12

I. The Story

A. The Wise Men (Magi)

-- The Wise Men, also known as the "Magi," the Greek term used here, were probably a special group of Persians (modern-day Iranians!) who were part astronomer and part astrologer - part scholar and part priest. The Persians, like many ancient people, believed that the stars exerted great influence over human affairs. Magi studied the stars, planets and constellations to discern and interpret the meaning of their movement, alignment and changes. The Magi in Matthew see a new star appear and, possibly because of the star's location, they interpret it as a sign of the birth of the Jewish King prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures.

B. Their Journey

-- In fact, the Wise Men were so convinced that the new star was the herald of the birth of the Jewish king they decided to travel to the land of the Jews to honor him. It probably was a long and difficult journey of as much as 1,000 miles, probably requiring several months. When the Magi finally arrived in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, they started inquiring about where to find the new heir to the throne.

C. Herod

-- The problem was that Judea already had a king - Herod the Great, who had been ruling for 32 years. Technically, Herod was a vassal king, appointed by Rome. Nevertheless, Herod zealously protected his power. He was insanely suspicious, even paranoid, about threats to his rule. Over the years he had executed not only countless religious leaders and court officials but also members of his own household, including his own wife and her mother and three of his sons because he thought they were plotting to take the throne from him.

Although Herod was about 70 and in failing health (and would soon die), he was bothered by the report that a delegation from Persia had arrived searching for a newborn king of the Jews. Matthew says "he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." In other words, if Herod was troubled, everyone was troubled - like the sign that says "If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

-- Herod immediately summoned and detained the Magi while he conferred with the religious leaders about where the Messiah was supposed to be born. They replied that the prophet Micah had foretold that Bethlehem, the little village about 5 miles outside of Jerusalem, would be the Messiah's birthplace. Learning this, Herod sent for the Wise Men. After asking them about when it was that they first saw the new star, Herod sent them to search in Bethlehem, instructing them that if they found this newborn king that they should report back so Herod could also go and pay homage to him.

D. Finding Jesus

-- It must have been late in the day when the Magi left Herod's palace because when they

went outside there in the sky was the star that had started their search. But this time the star did something really strange - it started to move and travel ahead of them, towards Bethlehem, directing them like a celestial GPS device until it stopped and shined down like a spotlight on a particular house, as if to say, "You have arrived."

-- It certainly wasn't a place where anyone would have expected to find a king. It was an ordinary house, occupied by an ordinary husband and wife. When the Magi entered the house, they found a rather ordinary-looking child, but they proceeded to do the most extraordinary thing - they bowed down on the floor before the child and worshipped him and then presented to him extravagant gifts - gifts fit for a king - gold and expensive perfumes, frankincense and myrrh.

II. The Insights from the Story

-- Let's look at four important insights or lessons that we find in this incident.

A. God Must Take the Initiative to Bring People to Christ.

-- God's initiative is evident in the contrast and the reversal in the story. Jesus' identity is concealed from the Jews who were looking for the Messiah and is revealed instead to the Gentiles who weren't looking for Him. The Gentile Wise Men journey hundreds of miles to find Jesus while the Jewish scholars and religious leaders who live beside of Him are totally unaware of His presence and are even disinterested when they learn of the Wise Men's search.

Those religious leaders knew the Scriptures - they knew immediately that the Messiah's birthplace would be Bethlehem - but they were blind to how God was fulfilling that Scripture all around them. When it comes to the Scripture, we need the Holy Spirit's illuminating ministry not only to understand the meaning of the Scripture but also to see its significance for us and our lives. These religious leaders and scholars are a warning to us that it's possible to read and study the Bible, to spend hours discussing it and even memorizing it yet still be spiritually blind.

-- How was it that those unlikely Gentile Magi became seekers of Christ? God drew them. He reached out to them in their darkness and spoke to them in their language - the language of the stars. He comes to us and seeks us and speaks to us where we are and then sovereignly directs the affairs of life to bring us to Christ.

John 6:37, 44 All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ... **⁴⁴** No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.

B. Jesus Is the Savior for All Peoples.

-- Matthew is writing his Gospel primarily for a Jewish audience. He begins the Gospel with a genealogy that carefully delineates Jesus' Jewish credentials. But Matthew doesn't tell us about Jewish shepherds coming to see Jesus; instead, Matthew tells us about Magi, unclean astrologers from the pagan land of Persia. The first to worship Jesus in Matthew's Gospel aren't Jews but Gentiles. Matthew's Gospel begins with Gentiles from another nation coming to find Jesus, and it ends with Jesus sending His disciples out to proclaim the Good News of salvation to all nations.

Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is more than a Messiah for the Jews. Jesus is the only Savior for all nations and peoples, just as Isaiah prophesied.

Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. **²** For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. **³** And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

C. God's Purpose Is for People to Worship His Son.

-- cf., vv. 2, 11

-- As I have already said, the author of this account is Jewish and is writing this primarily for Jews. A prime tenet of Judaism is that the only one who is to be worshipped is God. Yet Matthew tells this story in which the entire point is that Jesus is worshipped. The inescapable implication, of course, is that Jesus is God. That should come as no surprise. The same passage that the religious leaders used to identify the Messiah's birthplace also identifies the Messiah's divine nature.

Micah 5:2 (NASB) But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

-- It's interesting that the aspects of this story that we tend to focus on Matthew ignores. For example, we get obsessed about the star, speculating about whether it was a comet, or a conjunction of planets, or an angel; and we puzzle over how it appears, disappears, and then re-appears and how it moves and even leads the Magi to a particular house. But Matthew makes no effort to explain any of that. Matthew isn't focused on the star; Matthew is focused on the one that the star the star points to. The star is just a means that God uses to lead the Wise Men to worship Christ.

D. Jesus Must Be Accepted or Rejected.

-- One last observation from this fascinating story: there are just two responses that people can have to Jesus - to accept Him or to reject Him. The Magi accepted Jesus while Herod and the religious leaders rejected Him. Herod rejected Jesus by hostile opposition, while the religious leaders rejected Him by being indifferent to Him.

The same is true for us here today. Each of us will either accept or reject Jesus. There is no middle ground. Christ won't allow it. Jesus Himself will say later in the Gospel:

Matthew 12:30 He who is not with me is against me.

-- We will either accept or reject Jesus. Few, if any of us, will be like Herod and reject Jesus with hostile opposition, but the rejection of indifference is still rejection.

May God grant that we would be like the Magi - bowing before Jesus with worshipful adoration.