

December 11, 2016 “The Final Leg” Matthew 2:7-9

I firmly believe it is important that we understand there is a lot we do not know about the “wise men”. I do not mean that we should never produce pictures or tableaux or pageants in which the wise men are included in the manger scene. But when we do so, I think it is important that we be the ones to say...that's not what the Bible tells us about them. That's not what Matthew tells us as he sets down his account of the birth of Jesus. Matthew's account after all, is the authoritative narrative when it comes to the Christmas star, the journey of the Magi, the presenting of gifts to the infant Jesus. That these foreign, Gentile (not Jewish) wise men worshiped the baby born to be King. Matthew after all, is telling us the facts as he and the other disciples knew them, from a most reliable source, probably HIS mother, Mary, the wife of Joseph.

So let's take note that Matthew does not tell us, nor does he speculate about the entire journey that the Magi have made to find baby Jesus. He does not tell us where they came from, only the direction. They saw HIS star in the east. And they have made this long and dangerous journey in order that they might worship HIM. There are no details concerning the longest part of their traveling. We learn of them only when they arrive in Jerusalem. Heading after that star, in the direction it marked for them, they have come west. Jerusalem is where the trail has led them. And in that the star “disappeared” as mysteriously as it appeared in the first place....they have been reduced to asking directions. Where is the baby born to be King of the Jews?

Herod planned his moves carefully. As the puppet ruler of Judea, he summons the Rabbinical Council and asks them to tell him where the Messiah would be born. They answer him based on

their knowledge of Scripture. The Prophet Micah is very specific. He said, centuries before that Bethlehem was the place where the Shepherd of Israel would be born. So Herod now has a piece of the puzzle the Magi do not have. Information is critical.

The meeting at Herod's court is top secret. What that means is that only the wise men themselves could have told these details to Mary and Joseph. There are no extraneous sources. Only the Christians know, or rather knew these details, and their source is clearly Mary who alone lives through the crucifixion and resurrection of her first born son. And that her eldest son, Jesus cared for her, indicates that she has become a widow, raising her other children including James the author of the letter that bares that name. You see, Herod is planning something. Something heinous. Secrecy is of key importance. The wise men are invited to court. But it is a secret meeting. Not public. And not with the Rabbinical Council.

Before Herod shares what he has learned about the Messiah, he asks his question. They saw a star. They pursued its direction. They call it HIS star, presuming it marked Messiah's birth. When did it appear...precisely, exactly, when? It is apparent from what follows that the answer is just a little less than 2 years ago. From that time to this the Magi have planned and acted to make this journey that has led them to Jerusalem. They are very open and honest when it comes to sharing the facts of their experience. But here in Jerusalem they seem to have hit a wall. They cannot find the child. No one seems to know anything about him. They do not know how to proceed.

Herod plays his cards carefully. And strategically. The Messiah, that's the Jewish word, the Christ, that's the Greek word...is

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supposed to be born in Bethlehem. Go to Bethlehem. He probably gives them precise directions. A day's journey? Two at the most. Ask around someone will know. Bethlehem is the key. Herod encourages them. You have done a marvelous thing in coming to Jerusalem based on such scant information. Don't given up now, the prize is within your grasp. Make a careful search. Be diligent. I would start with the hotels and inns. There was a census about 2 years ago. People had to travel to their birth places to register. The Romans required it. There must be records. People will remember. You will find him there. And when you do, (this is important)! When you find him think of me and the help I have offered. Come to me. Share the rest of your story. I too wish to go and see this Messiah...to worship him. Enable me.

Based on what the Magi have told him about the star's appearance Herod plans and will ultimately carry out the slaughter of the innocents. It is a fact of history, the death of the male babies 2 years old and younger. It is part of the history of Bethlehem. Herod loves it, when a plan comes together.

There is another fact of history we must note even as we read this record of Matthew's Gospel concerning the birth of Jesus. After their audience with Herod, and on the basis of the information he has given them, they organize their caravan and they break camp. They head south and west to the village of Bethlehem. Any doubts they might have had about their task is almost immediately relieved. The star, that marvelous star reappears in the night sky. They note it too requires a course correction at this point...south and west to Bethlehem.

It is a matter of mathematics. When it comes to the

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heavens so much of understanding the stars and the planets involves mathematics. Modern astronomers have recreated the night sky way back 2012 years ago. The monks who developed the time line we use and the dating system that has become accepted made an error of about 4 years in their crude calculations. Approximately, (I am not a mathematician) 4 A.D. Two planets converge in the night sky, producing the brightest of all stars. They part for a number of months, and then their orbits converge again. A star that appears. And then disappears, only to mysteriously re-emerge, south, and west...to Bethlehem if you have just left Jerusalem.

And as this last leg of the journey unfolds that star appears to be the signpost that leads them like a beacon to the place where they find the child. My point is these details that Matthew shares with us, and with the larger Christian community are not hearsay. They are not based on superstition. They are not based on legend. And they go back to the very community that surrounded Jesus during the balance of HIS public ministry. To Mary his mother. To the women who helped her give birth. To some of the 120 who followed HIM loyally and continually on the journeys HE made around Galilee and down to Jerusalem, to the cross and the open tomb, HIS disciples.

The Christmas details are few in number that is true. But they are as solid as anything else that we know about the ancient world. They are matters of history. And with modern sciences like astronomy and mathematics, and archaeology we are continually discovering how dependable, how sound these few details really are. No rational person, who has read the records, would dispute them, unless they simply refuse to trust the evidence. And that is a reality we have to face where Christmas is concerned. You have to be

willing to trust the evidence. Bottom line...and this is consistent with the nature of the Lord our God...he requires of us that we exercise faith.

So to summarize. There was a birth star. The Magi saw it and believed they had figured out its significance. The King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Christ has been born. It is in the time of King Herod. Just after the order of the Roman Census. They set out to follow that star. They were good when it came to navigating by the stars and as a result even though the star disappeared they arrived in Jerusalem, and upset the population and Herod by asking about a baby born to be King. Herod went ballistic. In a calmer moment he used his head and called the Rabbinical Council to meet. He learned what he should have learned in shule...the prophecy concerning the Messiah's birth says it will take place in Bethlehem. He secretly arranges a meeting with the Magi. He found out when this adventure began. For Herod that was critical information. He shares the secret of Bethlehem. The Magi resume the journey and find the baby Jesus. And next week we will look at the rest of the story.

But remember this as you continue in your preparations for Christmas, the Christ feast, in 2016. These details have not simply shaped history...they are history. The King of the Jews, the Christ was born in Bethlehem. And that is where the wise men found HIM.

Let us pray;

Lord our God, when we permit you, you lead us to the truth, and we discover your eternal love, redeeming in its power. We thank you for the facts in the Gospel of Matthew. For these mysterious and committed Magi who searched for you and found

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you. Even so we pray, bless us with your presence at this special time of the year. Amen