

December 18, 2016 “The Heart of Christmas” Matthew 2:9-12

The story of the wise men is at the same time illuminating and mysterious. For those two reasons we should not be surprised at what the story reveals, and at the same time, its lack of answers to questions we long to ask. Like who were they? Where did they come from? Who gave what in the presentation of gifts? And what was their journey like? Matthew chapter 2, is the sole source of any detail that is dependable. And because the information given is so limited there are many scholars who are eager to dismiss its dependability. Matthew as a disciple of Jesus, and the author of this gospel is not marching to the beat of our drum, the world's drum, culture's drum, or even the church's drum. We need to remember as we read this story and all the other stories that Matthew shares, that he has one goal: to share his testimony of his experience of sharing 3 years following in the footsteps of Jesus. He is telling us it was a faith experience. He is telling us it was a life changing experience. He is sharing with us that the result was that all he wanted to achieve in the rest of his days was to share with anyone who would listen...what it came to mean to him, to be a servant of the King of Kings who has come into the world, to save people from the darkness of their sins.

All the reliable information about the Magi, the wise men, is told to us in verses 1 to 12 of this second chapter of Matthew's account. It boils down to this. They saw a star in the night sky which they believed to be the birth star, of a baby born to be King of the Jews. They knew enough about the Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew scrolls of the Old Testament that they wanted to see this baby. And they traveled at great expense, through dangerous territory (mostly desert) with a caravan sufficient to carry all the supplies needed for a journey of up to 2 years, including guards and guides.

We tend to assume they traveled together. We usually portray them that way on Christmas cards.

The star led them to Jerusalem. And in Jerusalem they received information through Herod that took them to Bethlehem. On the road to Bethlehem the star which had disappeared, reappeared. It led them to the house where they found the baby Jesus and his mother Mary. That's most of what Matthew tells us. But did you know?

There are legends concerning the Magi. Legends preserved especially by the eastern branch of Christianity which would come to have its headquarters in Constantinople. While we cannot prove or disprove the truth of any of these details...here is a list of them. The Syriac churches hold to a tradition that they were twelve in number. Most of Christianity uses the number three. Actually that is not based on any details other than the number of the gifts presented by the Magi to the baby Jesus by them. But legend does hand down to us names..Melchior, Balthazar, and Caspar. According to the legends of the Magi, Melchior was Persian, and the eldest of the three. Balthazar was Persian and the middle man in terms of their ages. The youngest was Caspar, a dark skinned man from India.

And according to legend, they journeyed with their individual caravans, received well wherever they stopped or entered communities. And they met in Jerusalem and there found common cause not only in their desire to find the child but to worship HIM. For each one had seen HIS birth star and begun a trek to see the ONE born to be King. It was Melchior who brought a gift of gold. Balthazar brought the gift of incense. And Caspar carried a gift too,

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myrrh. As I said we can prove none of these additional details, and as Protestants, and Presbyterians, we cling to the limited details of the Book of Matthew as the only dependable source concerning the wise men and their experience with Jesus.

Verse 9 tells us that following their interview with Herod, they journeyed to Bethlehem as Herod encouraged them to do. It tells us that the birth star reappeared in the night's sky. By the way, a detail I did not mention from the legends of the Magi is this one...that clouds had hidden the star from their sight, from the time they arrived in Jerusalem, until they continued their quest to Bethlehem. And finally, verse 9 tells us they found the place where the child was. They found the child born to be King of the Jews. They have realized their dream. And the opportunity to worship HIM is now before them.

Verse 10 skips us back to the reappearance of the star that led them on their journeys, or on the trek together. We will never really get behind the detail that they were together when they met with Herod in Jerusalem. And their goal of finding and worshiping the child is so clearly what Matthew wanted to share with us. The Magi were overjoyed at the reappearance of the star. Here is what is not in the text and yet obviously is one of the reasons Matthew tells us their story. They have a sense of destiny about this quest. They believe they are supposed to search for Jesus. They believe if they search hard enough and long enough they will find HIM. And the reappearance of the star is confirmation to them that God is blessing and will bless them for their commitment to the task. Matthew wants us to begin to grasp even at this point that Jesus changes lives. The point is not lost on Matthew and he wants us to get it, that there is a conviction among these “wise men” that God is leading them, and

with them, and blessing their labour.

Verse 11 makes a number of points and the very first is that we are not at the stable where Jesus was born. On coming to the house they saw the child with HIS mother Mary. Notice that. It is possible to read this account and conclude that the Magi never met Joseph. At this point in the narrative there is no mention of him, even though the next part of the chapter is the episode in which God speaks to Joseph in a dream, and reveals the need to flee...immediately...taking little time to pack...to flee to Egypt and so escape the wrath of Herod which is about to descend on Bethlehem and the families of children 2 years of age and younger. But again, it is Mary and the baby Jesus the wise men see.

And the Magi bowed down and worshiped HIM. Baby Jesus. And the compound phrases, “they bowed down and they worshiped HIM” makes the point soon to be underlined in their gift giving that they believe they are in the presence of divinity, the LIGHT of the world. It is easy to see why with the passing of years the church would bring them and the shepherds together at the stable in tableaux and chancel dramas. With the angels praising God as background music. Remember the shepherds ran into Bethlehem to see what God's angels have informed them occurred and returned to their flocks praising God. It was “convenient” to bring the worshiping crowd together. The shepherds who are unclean because of their work. Sinners. The Magi who are Gentiles, not part of Israel at all, lost sinners. And they bowing down to the ground, on their knees, worshiping HIM who will save HIS people...regardless of what or who they have been.

With the gift giving even we of the 21st century know we

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have arrived at the heart of Christmas. This is what it is about. Knowingly, faithfully, worshiping the Christ. And each of those gifts makes a statement about Jesus. Makes a statement about the importance of the moment. Gold, Melchior's gift because all three of them or 12 of them, (the number does not really matter). It is the fact that they know and they believe He is the ONE born to be King. Balthazar's gift of incense, specifically frankincense...they know, they believe, they are in the presence of God (“incense owns a deity nigh”), so close you could reach out and touch HIM. And finally Caspar's gift. It is Myrrh. A spice used to anoint the dead in preparing a body for burial, because they know, they believe, HE will give HIS life for HIS people, blessing all mankind. Bestowing peace.

Worshiping HIM, Jesus, is this important. And yielding our lives to HIM means recognition of all these things. If that were all we were told about the journey of the Magi, it would be a wonderful and at the same time a marvelous story. But it does not end there. And it is Matthew who brings this detail to the world of faith and knowing God. Angels have visited the shepherds in their fields. An angel of God has visited Mary and told her she is the chosen woman to bare the Christ child into the world. An angel has visited Joseph and told him to take Mary as his wife, that her pregnancy is the opposite of a sign of unfaithfulness, that the Holy Spirit has touched her, and that she carries the hope of all human kind in her womb. And now as they sleep in their encampment surrounded by their servants and their security details an angel visits “them”. Reveals to them, that they must not return to Herod, and so they choose an alternate route to return to their homes. And with that they turn and exit from the stage of world history, as mysteriously as they entered upon it.

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And that is also part of Matthew's message. The Magi came to our attention because the Lord God of Israel, the Lord God Almighty bade them come and see the child that was born to redeem. A Saviour who is Christ the Lord! And when they disappear from the story of Jesus, it is because they are obedient, and faithful to the reality of God's having led them, and touched them, and changed them. They hear God's message in a dream....and they know whose voice it is that they have heard.

That is a message that is the very heart of Christmas.

Let us pray;

Lord we thank you for the details concerning Christ's birth that are revealed to us in the Gospels, the Old Testament prophecies, and the verses of the Psalms. Be near us Lord Jesus as we sing your praises and rejoice on our hearing of the old details of your ever new saving grace. Receive our worship and grant us your peace. Amen