

November 27, 2016 “Wise Men” Matthew 2:1-2

This year as we approach Christmas I am going to focus on the story of the wise men, as we find it in Matthew chapter 2, verses 1-12. This morning's extremely brief portion of that section of the Gospel introduces us to the balance of the known facts about these figures.

First of all, it is important to note they are not fictional characters. They are not simply the stuff of legend, which would mean we could know nothing about them for certain. Legend implies that their story comes from a much later era where oral traditions have been passed down from generation to generation, evolving in the fog of changing times, and embroidered by the retelling around the camp fires attended by the writers who finally crystallized their story. That is neither an accurate idea nor fair to the Gospels of the New Testament.

Matthew's account of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus is one of the first that was written as a finished document. It was in all probability written mid first century, and competes only with Mark as the earliest recording of the history of Jesus life. So the story of the journey of the wise men in this skeleton form belongs to one of the earliest Christian manuscripts. It was written in market place Greek, which was the international language of business at the time.

So here is what we know, and I am listing the facts in the order in which Matthew gives them to us. The wise men, arrived on the scene and literally rode into history after the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Matthew tells us three things as the words tumble out of him, and as he writes this account down. It is the story not of the

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wise men but the telling of their role in the birth story of Jesus. Jesus was born without question in Bethlehem. And I tell you from personal experience one of the first things you learn when you visit Bethlehem today, is that it has a very proud history, that declares that fact. Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea.

But they arrived after the fact of Jesus birth. Christians have been making pilgrimages to Israel for 2,000 years to visit places that were the sites of Jesus life and ministry. And Christians have wanted to get as close to the birth place of Jesus as they could, as part of the pilgrimage experience. One of the things we lose sight of, is this. There are churches, many churches in Israel. And they were not built as we build churches today...you obtain land in the city you are interested in, and build to try and satisfy the needs of the congregation. In Israel churches have historically been built on the sites of significant events in the life and ministry of Jesus. So the closest you can get to the birthplace of Jesus is to visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. That church is not small. And the ground on which it stands includes the patch of earth on which the “stable” would have stood. That is precisely why the church was built on that ground many centuries ago.

The wise men arrived in Bethlehem, not as we tend to portray them in church tableaux, chancel dramas, and nativity sets, as part of the miracle of Jesus birth...but after that time. Perhaps as much as 2 years after. And I will say more about that as we unfold the further details of their experience. But once again these are the basic facts. They arrived after Jesus was born. They arrived in Bethlehem because that is where Jesus was born. Bethlehem in Judea, that province of the Roman Empire. And they arrived while Herod was King. Herod was a puppet ruler put in place by the

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Romans who always tried to administer their Imperial lands by using native figure heads to make the point they were sensitive to what it would take to secure peace. And as we know Herod was a bit of monster. He was a King because political decisions were made by the Romans. He applied for the job and was the successful candidate. As the Romans in general discovered, Pontius Pilate in particular, securing peace in conquered lands was never easy.

When the wise men arrived they arrived in the bigger city of Jerusalem, the capital of this province of the Empire Judea. And they reported in to Herod's administration. They are seeking information. They have come in search of the baby that has been born who will become King of the Jews. They are not lost. But neither are they certain of where this King has been born. And this is where we learn more about the wise men.

They are Magi. We would say they are astrologers. They are priests who study the stars and a host of ancient literature expecting to be able to forecast the future. They are not Jews. They are not Christians. Their wisdom has to do with the movement of the sun, the moon and the stars of night sky. They interpret what is happening, what happened, and what will happen based on their understanding of how the stars affect real life. And before we dismiss them as wierdos or kooks we need to take this fact seriously...the living God has touched them, influenced them, given them insight such that they have come in search of the baby Jesus. They are convinced...even though they do not know our Saviour's name that HE is a King, born to serve and save HIS people. That HE is dentiny's child.

The sign that has convinced them is the appearance of a star. Way back in the East where they came from, they saw

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something in the heavens that convinced them a King of world wide significance has been born. And they set out on a journey to follow that star, find that King, They have testified to anyone who might help them find the child, that they want to worship HIM. They believe HE is what? God's chosen ONE? God Himself? I cannot tell you the specific answer to my own questions. What I can tell you is what they told Herod and his counselors. They want to worship HIM. To bow before HIM in reverence and adoration. To recognize that Jesus is destiny's child, of international significance, or world wide importance.

We are not even told how many of them there were. You can read Matthew's account over and over. He does not tell us their number. What Matthew does tell us, is that they came, and they arrived in Jerusalem and sought information there that they might continue and successfully conclude their quest. They were committed. They were deliberate. They were forthright in their seeking help and information. And they assumed that if they had figured out this King of the Jews had been born, that others would be equally aware. It was important to the whole of the world after all!

There is a degree to which they have stumbled onto a world wide stage, without any insight at all, as to what it is they are reaching out to touch. They have little or no insight at this stage as to what they are in fact setting in motion with their innocent questions. At this point they take Herod at face value. They are attempting to deal honestly with the question of having located the area, how might they find the village, the home, the final co-ordinates as to the location of the "holy" child.

They come before Herod with all the conviction that the

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God of the universe has given them a sign which all the world should be aware of, a sign whose significance is far too important to pretend that it is a private matter. They have followed that star. They have invested significant amounts of money to get this far, because the journey is of universal importance. The state of the whole world will be in the hands of this ONE born to be King. They and their caravan, indeed, create a stir. And as we shall see, not just in the mind and heart of Herod who is King of Judea!

To the Magi, these wise men, a star is not a small matter. There is nothing ordinary or routine about its appearance, or its leading them. From their perspective, they find themselves journeying in the hands of God...whoever He is...and they expect someone like Herod to help them along the way. To say they are brave or bold is an understatement. I like the word committed. They are not about to turn back. They are not about to give up. They expect that the ONE who has given them the sign, and the insight, and set their feet along this path, to lead them to the final goal...to worship this singular King.

It amazes me how much we have in common with them, these Magi priests, these three kings, or whatever their number, these wise men. They have exercised faith. They have invested in the search for this King of the Jews. They want to worship HIM so much, they have braved the dangers of the journey, accepted its hardships, embraced the journey's sense of necessity. You can say all of those things about us. We are wiser than we realize. We have believed. We have accepted God's terms as we put one foot in front of the other, and journey praying as we go.

And the miracle is not the star. Not the big miracle at

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least. The miracle is the clarity with which we see the issues. It is almost Christmas 2016. Less than 5 weeks to go. And there is one thing we really do grasp...we will decorate, we will give and receive gifts, we will observe the feast with family around us. We will worship in our small village church. But it is all about Jesus. We share this in common with the wise men of that star spangled journey...it is all about Jesus.

Let us pray;

Lord and God, whom we would serve, we thank you for those who were wise and traveled with a singular desire to find your Son and to worship HIM. Be with us as once again we head into the home stretch of the journey to celebrate the Christ feast. Grant that our faith might be sufficient for the days ahead. Grant that our faith might require of us to help someone along the way between now and the 25th of December. Grant that as we sing the old carols, and hear the old words of the Gospel we might be delighted in the celebration of your promise of salvation. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen