

November 27, 2022 3 Magi And A Star Matthew 2:1-9

In the season of Advent, we turn to the Gospel accounts of Jesus birth. And the truth is that really means we turn to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark does not tell us about the birth of Jesus. He starts his account with the beginning of Jesus public ministry. Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River at the hands of his cousin, John the Baptist. John's Gospel does not tell us the details of Jesus birth either. What John does do is he teaches us what the details of Jesus birth mean. God's creative word of power became flesh and lived among us, the human race on the planet earth, in the occupied province of Judea.

Matthew and Luke focus on very different details of the birth of Jesus. It is in Matthew's Gospel we read about the Magi and the star they followed seeking Jesus. There are things we know for sure. There are things we do not know for sure. There are legends which have been preserved but which as Protestants and Presbyterians within that category of followers of Jesus, we are skeptical concerning the reliability of the supposed details. I have quoted the late Dr. Glen, Principal of Knox College when I was a student, some 54 years ago, that if we were going to be literal about the Scriptures we should really be literal. And being really literal about what the Gospels contain includes noting what they do not say.

Matthew does not say there were 3 Wise Men, the Magi. "Magi from the east, came to Jerusalem and asked,

“Where is the one who has been born, King of the Jews?” The word Magi is used in the newer translations, because they were priests in a religion devoted to the study of the stars to learn about the destiny of mankind in general and individuals in particular. The King James translates the original Greek text using the words “Wise Men.” What we can be confident about is that there were more than one, and they were recognized as men who were wise. The number three is accurate in terms of the gifts they brought...gold, frankincense and myrrh. But again...the text does not tell us precisely how many there were.

We sang, “We three Kings of Orient are,” this morning. I have long delighted in that particular carol. You need to know this. “In 1857, John Henry Hopkins assembled an elaborate Christmas Pageant to be performed at the General Theological Seminary in New York. He is the one who wrote the music and the words we sang. He named the Kings, Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar.” I like the carol. It teaches us the meaning of the gifts that were given, concerning which, Matthew is very specific. But we do not know for certain that there were three, nor do we actually know their names.

That does not mean we should write them out of the story. Matthew like all of the 12 disciples knew Mary, Jesus mother personally. We would be crazy to think she did not talk about Jesus birth, the wise men, and the gifts. What the Gospel of Matthew tells us is that the Magi made their journey in search of Jesus, just as Luke tells us Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem to register as part of the great census.

As a boy tenor in the choir at St. George's Anglican Church I sang Balthazar's verse as a solo. "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume/Breathes of life, of gathering gloom/Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying/Sealed in the stone cold tomb." I can't remember how I got the job. I know we did not attend worship after the Christmas Eve performance. But I sang that part which focused on the death of Jesus. My point is that we cannot throw Matthew's account out because he did not tell us some of the details we would like to know. And our Nativity set involves 3 Wise Men. And if we had a pageant, I would be the last one to exclude the tradition that there were three. But the truth, the Gospel truth is we do not know for sure.

And then there is the matter of the Star. "O, O, Star of wonder, star of night/Star with royal beauty bright/Westward leading, still proceeding/Guide us to thy perfect light!" There is no question they saw something in the night sky. Astronomers tell us it was probably the conjunction of two planets, creating a brighter "star" in the heavens that all the others. The Magi did figure out the riddle of what it meant. And they did follow it. And they did find Jerusalem as a result and eventually an audience with King Herod. Herod was Jewish and a Roman puppet king. And he was no Bible scholar. He did not know where the Messiah was supposed to be born. But he was disturbed. And he had some authority. So he calls the chief priests and the teachers of the Law together and sets them the task of explaining where the Messiah should be born.

His goal? To feed the information to the Magi. To have them continue in their quest. Hopefully to succeed in finding the infant. He commissioned them to return and report where the child was. According to the time of the appearance of the star the toddler could be as old as two years. But here are the facts. The Magi, wanted to worship this baby and present their prophetic gifts. Acknowledge Jesus as King of Kings, very God of very God, born to die to save HIS people. Herod simply wanted to be able to kill HIM.

In terms of understanding? I will never quite get my head around the fact that knowing the movements of the stars in the heavens, you can somehow play the night sky in reverse all the way back to the time of the Magi, and Herod. But I watched it unfold on the ceiling of the Planetarium in Toronto when Rebekah and Matthew were children. I do know I saw it. Star of wonder. Star of night. Star with royal beauty bright. I also remember it disappeared for a time, and the science is that there was a second conjunction just as Matthew describes it. And it led the Magi to Bethlehem. You need to know that. What Matthew tells us here is scientifically supportable. That star, that larger speck of light in the night sky was real.

And the Magi, the Wise Men, of their time, followed it. And as a result they found Jesus. And they did what they had journeyed for close to two years to do. They worshipped HIM. And then they presented gifts that they had prepared and chosen and brought with care. Every bit as much care as we take in looking for just the right gift for the ones whom we love.

Their action became the model of one of the oldest traditions of Christmas. The gift giving. It is not just a materialistic thing. It is a holy tradition. And the wisemen were wise because they recognized who Jesus is, when HE was just a baby on the verge of learning to talk. They had followed that star (that's what they thought it was!) and they had found the Saviour of the world. Destiny. In fact He probably saved their lives too. Herod had a talent for eliminating loose ends. They believed enough to acknowledge the angel in their dreams which told them not to go back to Herod. They took that other route home and vanished off the pages of history. Because they were not on television, or radio, or researched with modern technology. They went back East.

This morning we have officially turned the page. It is not Fall. It is not Winter, even though there will be days when it looks like both outside. But it is Advent. The season that leads us to the celebration of the birth of Jesus. We do not know all the details. But...and this is really important....the details we do know are concrete. Just as faith is real. And love is real. And joy is real....we can trust the facts we are given. And the most amazing detail about the birth of Jesus just might be this one. A number of gentile wisemen, saw a star, and figured out what was happening in the world of their day. They understood God was involved. And whatever it cost, whatever it took....they followed that "star" ....until they found Jesus.

May God help us to be just as wise. For this also undeniable. We are on a journey that will lead us to Christmas.

The birth of the child who became the man, who died and rose again, to save the world...to save you....to save me.

Let us pray;

Lord, God, Almighty, we give thanks for the details and the facts that are recorded in the Scriptures and specifically in the Gospels. These sacred accounts give us light in the midst of the darkness, understanding in spite of our many questions, and bring us to faith in YOU, the God who is. As we light candles and decorate our homes, remind us that the evergreen, in all of this is symbol of YOUR undying love for us, and the eternal life YOU give us, and the Kingdom which is YOURS and will never pass away. Bless us with light that exposes YOUR grace given us in Jesus. Amen