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Wise Men

a sermon on Matthew 2.1-12

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

You see them on Christmas cards and church bulletins. You see them in your living room if you have a nativity set. If you crawl down into the ancient Roman catacombs, where Christians met in secret in the second century, you will see them in pictures that were drawn more than two hundred years before Christmas was first celebrated as a special day. They are the wise men, so familiar to us, and yet at the same time so strange and mysterious. We take them for granted, and we assume we know about them. And we do, but most of what we know is wrong. And what we want to know, we don't. Who were the wise men? And what are they doing here? That is, why are they part of the gospel? What do they mean to us today?

Before we can learn who they were, we need to learn who they were not. The classic hymn, which we will sing shortly, proclaims, "We three kings of orient are." But they were not kings, and there were probably not three of them. Matthew calls them *magi*. Magi were not royalty. The more successful ones served kings. Their function was to interpret the stars, to interpret dreams, and to foretell the future. In the modern world, we draw a big, clear line between astronomy, the scientific study of the stars, and astrology, which includes horoscopes and such. That line did not exist in the ancient world. Magi were a little of both. There was a scientific side to them. They carefully observed and recorded the movements of the heavens. But they also practiced divination, magic, and the occult. Some could appropriately be called wise men, because they served as advisors to kings and governors. Others were more like wandering fortune tellers, picking up clients among the common people.

Where did we get the idea they were kings? Probably from Psalm 72.10-11: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." The verse is talking about a king from David's line. Psalm 72 may have been used for coronations. It gave rise to the expectation that the kings of the nations would pay homage to the Messiah. It was easy for the magi to get promoted to kings in popular Christian imagination.

The idea that there were three of them comes from the fact that they brought three gifts. But Matthew never says how many there were. Later Christian traditions estimated their number between 2 and 12 before finally settling on three. Legends gave them

names and described their appearance. In the East they were Hormizdah, king of Persia; Yazdegerd, king of Saba; and Perozadh, king of Sheba. In the West they became known as Melchoir, usually pictured as an old man with a long white beard; Gaspar, young and clean shaven; and Balthasar, black-skinned and bearded. These are only legends, though. We do not actually know how many there were, where they were from, or their ethnicity.

Matthew says they came from “the East.” This could mean Persia. That’s where the term magi originated. In the year A.D. 614, Persian armies invaded Palestine in what was by then the Christian Roman Empire. They burned churches wherever they could, until they came to Bethlehem. There they saw a mosaic in the church depicting the visit of the magi to Jesus. The magi were clearly Persian by the appearance of their clothing, so the Persians spared that church. This tells us some Christians in the fourth century assumed the magi were Persians.

They may have been from Babylon, however. We know magi were popular there. The book of Daniel tells us there were magi at the Babylonian court. Babylon also had a Jewish connection. But then again, they may have been from Arabia. The gifts they brought probably came from there, though this does not necessarily mean they did.

Speaking of the gifts, later tradition offered reasons for the specific items given. Gold was said to be a gift worthy of a king. Frankincense was a gift worthy of divinity, for incense was burned in the temple. Myrrh was a spice often used to prepare the dead, and so pointed to the fact that Jesus would die a sacrificial death. This too, however, is merely pious speculation. All we can say for sure is these were expensive gifts, worthy of a king.

Matthew says they followed a star. Scholars have tried to figure this out too. Was it some supernatural portent placed in the sky just for the birth of Jesus, so that trying to figure it out from astronomy is pointless? Was it a supernova? None were reported at the time, but this explanation has been offered. Was it a comet? Halley’s comet appeared in the sky in 12 B.C. That’s a bit too early. Jesus probably was born in 6 B.C. If that seems strange to you, it’s because the guy who first tried to calculate the date got it wrong. Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., so Jesus had to be born earlier than that. Anyway, a comet seems unlikely as the star, but possible. Or, was the star really the conjunction of three planets – Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn? They came together in 7 B.C., about the right time. They would have appeared in the sky in the constellation of Pisces, which to some Babylonian astrologers represented the last days and the Hebrew people. Jupiter represented a world ruler, and Saturn the region of Palestine. Would astrologers have interpreted this conjunction to mean a world ruler would be born in Palestine in the end times? Maybe. But we can’t say for sure.

Here is yet another mystery that has stumped the wise and the curious: Were the Magi good guys or bad guys? We tend to assume they were good, because they brought gifts to Jesus. But early Christians were a little surprised to find them doing that.

Everywhere else in the Bible, magi are negative. The occult, astrology, and fortunetelling are condemned in strong terms. The Law of Moses forbade astrology, magic, and witchcraft. The book of Acts tells how pagans coming to faith in Christ would burn their magic books and spells. One of the earliest Christian writings outside the Bible is a first century text called *The Didache*, or Teaching. It forbids Christians from being magi.

Because magi are so often portrayed as bad, some early Christian interpreters saw the visit of the magi as the surrender of the dark powers to Christ. The church father Ignatius, writing in the second century, claimed that “by means of the star which manifested Jesus to the world ‘all magic was dissolved’” [Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, p. 168]. Incense and myrrh were sometimes used in magical incantations. Were the magi surrendering to Christ the tools of their ungodly trade? Appealing though this reading was to the early church fathers, it is not Matthew’s view. Mathew portrays the magi positively. They see the star. They correctly interpret its meaning. They come to Jerusalem. They hear the scriptures. They worship the child and bring gifts. They do not tell Herod where to find Jesus. In Matthew’s mind, and in his gospel, they are good guys. They are Gentiles who hear God’s call through nature, then through scripture, and who respond appropriately.

As you can see, we knew almost nothing about the wise men. We don’t know who they were or where they were from or how many there were. Do we know they really existed? Some skeptical scholars have suggested they didn’t, that Matthew made them up, weaving his story out of several Old Testament stories. Such skepticism is possible because we have no corroboration from any source outside Matthew. The other gospels do not tell us about the wise men. There is no documentation about the star. And when the Jewish historian Josephus catalogues Herod’s many sins, he does not mention the slaughter of the babies of Bethlehem. All this proves very little, however, and leaves us in a position where we either trust Matthew or we do not. Those who stand outside the Christian faith or are new to it may be prone to doubt him. Those of us who have learned to trust the scriptures because they have shown us the Living Savior may be prone to trust. I am prone to trust Matthew. One reason is, if he were going to make a story up, why make it about magi? We’ve already seen how many early Christians were surprised and perhaps a bit embarrassed to find magi taking such a positive role in the birth of Jesus. Also, why tell the story at all? The point he wants to make hardly needs such an elaborate story. Matthew surely believed it really happened. It is an account that leaves us with more questions than answers, but we do not go wrong in accepting it.

What then does it mean? Why are the magi in the gospel? Why are they important to us today? The answer to these three questions is the same, and it is the heart and soul of this sermon. If you take away nothing else, take this ... The magi represent you and me. ...

When Jesus rose from the dead and sent his disciples out to tell the good news, something wonderful and shocking happened, something they were not fully prepared for. Gentiles began to accept Jesus. A gentile is, of course, anyone who is not Jewish. From the perspective of a first century Jew like Jesus or Paul or Matthew, there were two kinds of people in the world – Jews, God’s chosen people, and everyone else – the nations, the Gentiles (*Gentiles* means nations in Hebrew). The scriptures promised a Savior. They spoke of a king like David who would rescue God’s people and rule over the nations. But what would become of the nations? Several scriptures hinted that they would come to know God through his Messiah. Isaiah said the vocation of Israel was to be a light to the nations. But most Jews in the first century couldn’t hear that message. Their experience had been, Gentiles are the godless, immoral, evil foreigners who oppress us.

Jesus limited his ministry to what he called “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He occasionally dealt with a Samaritan or a Roman, but these were the exceptions. After Pentecost, however, it wasn’t long before the gospel was spreading like wildfire among the nations. It caught everyone by surprise. Yet when they looked back, they could see all the signs pointing to this very thing. All along God’s plan had been to bring the nations into the covenant he had made with his people. By faith in Jesus, the Messiah, Jew and Gentile alike could receive the inheritance God has prepared for his people. The magi are an early sign, in the life of Jesus and in the gospel of Matthew, pointing to God’s exciting plan.

For Matthew, the magi represent the best of the Gentile world. They are wise men. They are open to spiritual truth. They are seekers. God speaks to us through two books, the book of nature and scripture. The magi didn’t have the scriptures. But they paid attention to the book of nature. And God spoke to them, and called them. And like Abraham, they left their country for a land God would show them.

The book of nature can tell us something about God, but not nearly enough. Paul wrote in Romans that it shows us God’s eternal power and divine nature ... if we don’t suppress the truth, which we are prone to do. Anyway, nature reveals enough truth to leave us without an excuse when we fail to honor God, but not enough truth to know the Savior or his grace. For that we need the scriptures. When the magi inquired at Herod’s court about the baby, the scriptures guided them to Bethlehem. They believed the promise, and they acted in obedience. In this they are models for all who come after: Righteous Gentiles who hear the message with faith and worship the Christ.

You can see this when you compare the magi to others in the gospel. Compare them to Herod and the chief priests and scribes. Actually, Herod had a rocky relationship with the chief priests and scribes. The chief priests and scribes resented their Roman rulers while Herod got his power by serving the Romans. One thing they could agree on, they didn't believe in Jesus. Herod wasn't interested in a rival. The chief priests and scribes had the scriptures as well as the book of nature. They had every advantage. Yet they did not recognize God's plan or his Messiah. Throughout the gospel they reject Jesus until they finally conspire in his death. They should have known better. Where the magi saw and believed, the guardians of the Law of Moses and the teachers of Israel failed to see or believe. This scenario was repeated in Matthew's church. Some of the religious authorities did believe in Jesus. Some of the priests and scribes. There are a few clues that indicate Matthew may have been one of them, that he was a scribe who came to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Yet most did not. Meanwhile, foreigners and godless heathen were lining up to be baptized. Matthew wanted them to know God had prepared a place for them from the beginning. He wanted you to know that God prepared a place for you. If you are Jewish, the covenant was always for you, and God sent Jesus the Messiah to be your Savior. If you are not Jewish, God always planned to open the covenant to you too, and he sent Jesus the Messiah to be your Savior. When you see the magi kneeling before the baby Jesus, they represent you.

You can also compare the magi at the beginning of the gospel with the Romans at the end of it. At the end of his ministry, Jesus encountered an emissary from the most powerful king in the world, Caesar. This emissary was no magi, however. He was the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Like the magi, he was warned through a dream not to harm Jesus. Like the magi, he gave gifts to Jesus, albeit gifts of a very different sort. Like the magi, he acknowledged Jesus as a king, albeit mockingly. He had a sign posted on the cross, "Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews." Instead of the star that guided the magi, the Romans at the cross receive a different sign: thick darkness. Yet one of them, like the magi, understands, "Truly this man was God's Son."

In the gospel of Matthew, the magi represent the Gentile world – the nations who acknowledge that Jesus is Lord. They do what every person should do: they pay attention to God and are open to the scriptures. They respond to God's Word the way everyone should: they believe and they worship.

That's what I want you to do. Actually I want you to do three things as the result of this fascinating sermon on the magi:

1. We only see the magi at Christmas, but during the Christmas season from August to December they are everywhere: on cards, wrapping paper, signs and posters, cartoons, in songs on the radio – you can't miss them. In the future, whenever you see them, remember that they represent you. They are a reminder that Jesus is not only the Jewish Messiah, he is the Savior of the whole world. God's love is big enough for you.

They were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. In that regard they are your forerunner. When you see them, you show thank God for his wonderful grace, and you should imagine yourself among them.

2. Pay attention to God. The magi were looking for God's hand at work. They expected him to do something. I know detecting what God is up to is difficult. Books on how to be a pastor often say, "Find what God is doing and join him at it." That's easily said, but tougher to accomplish. But you can be absolutely certain of two things: God is present ... and he is doing something, working out his plan and purpose.

What is he doing in our world? Our nation? What is he doing in our community? In our church? What is he doing in your family? In your life? Pay attention to God! Do you observe the world around you and marvel at the Creator? Do you spend enough time in scripture so that you recognize God when you encounter him? Do you look for him in your everyday experiences? Pay attention!

3. Have a fearless faith. It took courage for the magi to make the long trip to find Jesus. Any of a thousand things could have gone wrong. They were not guaranteed success. They risked their reputations. When they didn't find the child in Jerusalem, and they went to a humble home in Bethlehem, they opened themselves to critics saying, "You were wrong. You didn't find the child you were seeking, so you chose one at random!" They risked ridicule and danger and much else. Do you? Is your faith fearless? Are you willing to put your reputation on the line to make a commitment to Christ or to stand up for him? Have a fearless faith!

4. Honor the king. Give him gifts worthy of the Lord of all, worthy of the one who loved you enough to die for you. Give your heart, mind, soul, and strength. Honor him with your talent and time. Honor him with your lifestyle. Honor him with your money and resources. Make your life a gift worthy of the king!

I don't know about you, but I'm ready to sing. "We Three Kings" is not entirely accurate, but it is the best song about the Magi we have. And, its heart is in the right place. So let's enjoy it together. Amen.

rev_mauldin@yahoo.com