

What Were They Thinking? : The Wise Men
By Jason Huff
December 11, 2011
Joel 2:28-32, Psalm 33:1-11, Matthew 2:1-12

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 2:1-12. Listen now to God's Word. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."

When I was a kid, I was a big comic book collector. I was never much into super heroes, but they got all the great titles. All of them started with bigger-than-life adjectives. Spiderman was never *just* Spiderman; he was the "amazing" Spiderman or the "spectacular" Spiderman. The Hulk was "incredible." The X-Men were "uncanny." The Fantastic Four were, well, fantastic. Even on the silly side of things, there was "Mighty Mouse." And of course, there was the granddaddy of them all – Superman. Maybe the comic book people thought they'd sell more copies if their heroes were really awesomely terrific. I dunno.

The reason I mention them today is that it's easy to forget just how incredible some stories genuinely are. We are so used to hearing about the birth of Jesus that we start to find it familiar, not fantastic or amazing. But I think we can recapture all of that if we look closely. In the case of the wise men, we're talking about strange and shadowy figures. If they had their own comic book, they'd be called "The Mysterious Magi." Asking ourselves, "what were they thinking?," will help us see the mysterious wonder of God Himself and lead us to worship Jesus with a refreshed sense of awe.

Now the name for the wise men is "magi" is Greek, and in Jesus' day, "magi" referred to magicians and sorcerers and priests of other religions. Israelites would have been suspect of anyone given the title "magi" because Scripture forbid sorcery. The most famous "magi" in the New Testament is a man named Simon, who was rebuked for trying to purchase the gift of the Holy Spirit from the apostles for his own gain.

Yet in 600 B.C., the historian Herodotus tells us that the word “magi” originally referred to the priests and sages of the Medes, a people north of Babylon in Persia. They were philosophers who studied astronomy and the sciences, as well as the interpretation of dreams, and they were the instructors of the Persian kings. Scripture tells us that the magi came from the east, so it’s very possible that the magi who visited Jesus were the descendents of these ancient Medes. Whoever they were, wherever they came from, however many of them there were, they created a stir when they arrived in Jerusalem.

While it might have been strange to see wealthy eastern astronomers in Jerusalem, it wasn’t so much their appearance that troubled Herod and the entire city. It was what they were there for. They claimed to have seen the star of the “king of the Jews” and had come to worship Him. We tend to think they followed the star to Jerusalem, but Scripture doesn’t say that. They saw a star that, to them, signified the birth of the “king of the Jews,” and so they went to the place where you would find a Jewish king – Jerusalem.

What’s so bizarre is that the Jewish people had no idea what they were talking about. The Old Testament gives bits and pieces of information about the coming messiah, but it never mentions anything about a star heralding His arrival. Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospel writers, and so he’s quick to tell us when ancient prophecy is fulfilled, but here, he’s silent. Somehow, in some way unbeknownst to anyone else, God has given these Gentiles, these astronomers, a sign they could understand. The herald that announces the arrival of the long-awaited messiah is not an angel or a prophet, but outsiders, non-Jews, who are there to worship the newborn Christ.

And that’s another problem for the Jews. Worship? Worship is for God alone. You might respect a king or pay him tribute, but to worship him? That’s blasphemy. If the history of Israel had taught the Jews anything, it had taught them that they were to worship and serve the one true God and none other. What were the wise men thinking when they pledged to worship this new king? Were they simply following their old pagan ways? Or had God, who had seen fit to alert them by a star of Jesus’ coming, also given them insight into Jesus’ own nature?

It’s no wonder that Herod had a secret meeting with them and sent them away quietly. Herod was a half-Jewish puppet king whose authority came from Rome. A Jewish messiah could have wiped away all his power in an instant. When he sends the magi off on their fact-finding mission, he does so intending to eliminate any possible threat to his throne. Bethlehem was only a day’s journey from Jerusalem, and Herod probably thought the whole mess would be over in a week’s time.

But there’s another miracle. The star that began the fateful journey? Not only does it come back, causing the magi to be overjoyed, but it leads them on their journey. Once again, our modern pictures of the wise men might do us some harm. Herod sent the magi to Bethlehem, but the text doesn’t say they actually went there; it says the star led them to where the child really was. According to Luke, after they had dedicated Jesus in the temple, Mary and Joseph took Jesus home soon afterwards to Nazareth. It’s very possible that the wise men didn’t find Jesus in Bethlehem at all. Since the magi had first seen the star two years prior, it’s very likely that Jesus isn’t still lying in a manger when they arrive.

But regardless of whether they arrived on Christmas night or two years later, the wise men know exactly what they have to do. They are there to worship. The word for “worship” in Greek can also mean “to kneel,” and Matthew wants no confusion as to what’s going on; that’s why he uses two separate words to describe this scene. Just like we heard in the song “O Holy Night” a few minutes ago, literally, the magi first fall on their knees and then they worship Jesus.

They haven’t come empty-handed. They present gifts of incredible value – gold and frankincense and myrrh – that foreshadow Jesus’ life. Gold symbolized kingship and lined the first temple. Frankincense was burned by priests on the altar. Myrrh was used for embalming. In these gifts, we see Jesus hailed as both our king and high priest, and in His death He would redeem His people. But in another way, these gifts would become very practical. When the family has to flee to Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath, these gifts funded their journey. The family would have enough money to survive no matter where they might wind up.

Then the wise men leave...but not by the route they came. Just as a special star had guided them, a dream warns them not to return to Herod. Direct disobedience to a king meant certain death; yet the magi knew that they had to obey God rather than men. They head back east as Jesus’ family heads south. We have to wonder...whatever became of them? Did they tell stories of this little messiah when they returned home? Or did they keep silent, worried that any tales they might tell could somehow reach Herod’s ears or others who might be after this child? We don’t know. Once they leave Jesus, they fade into the mists of time. Only the mysteries of their wondrous trip remain.

There are a few questions I would like to ask the magi myself. First, what was it like to make such a long journey on the promise of a single star? The magi’s journey echoes that of Abraham, the father of Israel. In Genesis 12, God speaks to Abraham, telling him to move to Canaan, the land that would eventually become Israel. Abraham believed God and obeyed, even though God didn’t speak to him again for twenty years. In the same way, the magi journeyed several hundred miles one way. Their caravan traveled for months based on a single star. We don’t even know *why* that star made a difference, what legend had been passed down so that the magi would go on a crazy trip across a continent to find an infant king worthy of worship.

The journey of Abraham and the magi is similar to our journey today as Christians. Some believe that all we have to do to please God is to come to church or to pray a prayer saying we’re sorry and asking God to save us. But following Christ is not a one-time thing. It’s a journey of faith that lasts a lifetime. God has put His Holy Spirit in our hearts and Scripture in our hands as stars lighting our crossing. Yet there are times when God seems distant; we walk in shadows along an unfamiliar road, holding on only to the promise God has given us.

But as we face those uncertain moments along the way, we can be encouraged – God has not left us. The magi arrived in Jerusalem only to find not the king of the Jews but an ignorant and dangerous man on the throne. But at just the right moment, God’s nightlight not only reassured the wise men, it led the way right to Jesus. So too it will be with us. Keep following, keep faithful, and God will not abandon you. When you fear that the next step into the darkness will be off the cliff, God will still be there. Watch for His light, which pierces through even the fiercest darkness.

And here's the best part: when you journey with God, God will always come through. What's so crazy to me is how little interest the priests and the teachers of the law had in the messiah's coming. Herod asks them the question of where the messiah is to be born, and they answer him matter-of-factly. There's no rush among the priests to find the "king of the Jews." They had their sacrifices; they thought they were right with God. The people who should have been most interested in finding the messiah didn't even care. And so God's Son comes first not to the religious and highly-connected, but to foreigners willing to travel, willing to worship, willing to risk it all to greet God's own boy when He arrived.

There's another question I'd ask the magi: why was worshipping Jesus so important to them? It could have been their lack of understanding – they might not have known that no Jew would ever stand for the worship of a human being, even a mighty king. But I believe it was something more. Even if they were ignorant of Jesus' true nature as the Son of God, they still got it right. Not only are they the first Gentiles to worship Jesus, they are the first people to worship Jesus, period. Isn't that amazing? The Lord and Savior, born of the Jews, is first worshiped as divine by those who are outside of God's covenant people. In their worship, God is already showing that Jesus is going to open wide the doors of His Kingdom to anyone who will come to Him.

But what they do also makes us rethink what worship really means. They didn't sing a song or listen to a sermon or even pray a prayer. They fell down at Jesus' feet. They gave him honor and praise. They were declaring their utter subservience to Him. Their trip, their gifts, all of it was a part of their worship. They had dedicated a couple of years of their lives just to meet this King and show Him honor. How does our worship look in comparison? The wise men prove that worship is not just for Sundays. It's an everyday giving of our lives to Christ. With every step on the dusty trail, the magi became servants of the living God. How might our lives show that same service, that same willingness to bow before the King of Glory? How do we worship in line at the supermarket or waiting at McDonalds, in our work, even in our retirement? Are the things we buy and watch showing how we bow before our King? Each and every day gives us another chance to worship.

If I were to get to ask the magi a last question, I'd ask: what did those gifts cost you? Now I know that it's rude to ask how much somebody spent on a gift. But the reason that the magi became known as kings over time has to do with the value of the items they brought to Jesus. Gold and frankincense and myrrh – these were not tokens. These were the finest offerings they could bring. There's no telling if the gifts left them impoverished or not. But there is no doubt that there was a gigantic cost in presenting them to Jesus.

And that becomes the question for us this holiday season as well...what do our gifts to Jesus cost us? Over the last month, some of us have filled out our pledge cards and figured out what we might give to the church in the coming year, and that's important. Honestly, we need your financial support in order to pay the bills and to do the ministry we accomplish here. But that's only part of what I'm talking about here. What does it cost us to be followers of Jesus Christ?

In the Old Testament, there's a story about King David, who was commanded by God to build a sacrificial altar on the property of a man named Araunah. Araunah deeply respected King David and said that he would give David whatever he needed – the property, the wood, the animals, everything. But King David replied to him, "Sell them to me at the full price. I will not make an offering to the LORD that costs me nothing."

I also read a parable this week that brings this home. One year, a farmer's animals decided that they were going to make the family a wonderful Christmas breakfast. The cow said, "I'll donate some milk." The chicken said, "I'll lay some eggs." Then they looked at the pig quaking in his hooves and said, "Aren't you going to give something?" The pig said, "You can give your gifts and won't miss them at all. But if I give him bacon, I give him everything."

Friends, a faith that costs us only an hour on Sunday is not very valuable. If all we give of our time and our energies and our salaries or pensions is what's left when we're done with it all, it's not a worthy gift for the King of Kings. But a genuine sacrifice, a costly gift, will not go unnoticed by our Savior. The wise men's journey is recorded in Scripture and remembered two thousand years later because they gave a valuable gift of their time trekking across the desert...a valuable gift of their talents and faith by spotting that star and believing its message...a valuable gift of the treasures they brought before the young King. What gifts are you going to present to Jesus in the coming year?

The mysterious magi aren't going to get their own comic book. They are in and out of the story in a flash. They are a curious footnote in history. Yet because they travelled, because they worshipped, because they gave richly of themselves, we will always know them as an integral part of the birth of Jesus. May we be inspired by their journey, humbling ourselves at the feet of Jesus in worship, giving Him all of ourselves, that we might glorify Him and enjoy His goodness forever.