

The Magic Moment

Matthew 2:1-12

Focus: Faithful response/worship to Christ does not require full understanding, but devotion!

FUNCTION:

Prayer for Illumination

Sermon

I listened to an interview with a famous professor of preaching as he asked to give advice to pastors as they preached through Advent and Christmas.

He talked about the **temptation to try to do new and inventive things** to make the good ol' Christmas story fresh and modern.

Or to go to the **other extreme and dive into the deep end of complicated theological discourse**, explaining the nature of Incarnation and the mysteries of God.

He urged pastors not to fall prey to this temptation, because the **Advent and Christmas story hold a magic and wonder all by itself.**

It doesn't need any extras.

It just simply needs to be told;

This strange, extraordinary story of "God with us".

It seems to me that there something gospel to that idea.

That this is a story that comes to us as-is.

Sometimes, I **fear people get trapped** on their faith journey when they **worry that they don't have things figured out.**

I don't know the Bible inside and out.

I'm not an eloquent pray-er.

But if the story of the Gospel is a **God-made-skin who meets us where we are,**

It seems to me that the **most important place to be is where we are.** (that is to say, honest with ourselves about how we're doing)

Maybe the **most important beginning of faith is to affirm with humility what we don't know!**

The story of the Magi (or wise men) tells it well.

There is **so much we think we know** about these guys.

They are **surrounded by traditions, legends and speculations** concerning the details of their life.

Somewhere, **history has attributed them names** (Balthazar, Melchior and Casper) but those names are not in the biblical account.

Or think about this:

When you picture this particular part of the nativity

Or unpack your nativity set for the living room, how many wise men are there?

Three, right?

Tell me, glance over the passage and tell me where it says there were three wise men?

[pause] Let me know when you find it.

So let me guess, how many of you, before walking into worship today,

if asked how many wise men, would have automatically said 3?

So this puts it to us:

Can we put our faith in what we think we know?

In our understanding?

What we do know about the Magi is that they're from the east, most likely (although not certain) Persia.

These were the **university professors** of their day.

They were **learned men**

(sorry ladies; as James Brown said, it was a man's world).

Scholars who study **science, medicine, literature.**

They were often **advisors to kings and rulers**, as they were known for their insight and wisdom.

It is quite likely they were **familiar with the "religious myths"** of other people groups.

They were something of **astrologers**, knowledgeable about the stars and their courses and would certainly take note when unexpected things occurred in the heavens.

But there is one question that comes up in my mind all the while:

Why do these foreign professors care anything about the prophecies or messiahs of a relatively small nation of people who were ruled by Rome?

Why would they bother to travel those hundreds and hundreds of miles on foot (or was it on camels as all the pictures portray? Again, we don't really know!) to pay homage to a God who they didn't even recognize?

But they obviously recognized something important about all this.

Important enough to pack-up for the long haul,

(dangerously taking along precious cargo that could have easily fallen prey to bandits)

Something significant about this occurrence in the heavens and the person to whom it pointed.

There has been lots of speculation about the astronomical event of the Star of Bethlehem.

Many have attempted to determine whether or not it was a **comet** that might have made a regular pass.

Apparently, Halley's Comet was supposed to make a pass around 11 BC.

One of the **more interesting theories** I've heard is that it was an unusual conjunction of **Saturn and Jupiter within the constellation, Pisces.**

In ancient times, Pisces was considered a constellation of the Jews.

Therefore, the change of brilliance of a star would mark the coming of a momentous occasion for the Jewish people.

There is **biblical precedent** for this as well, for in the book of Numbers, Balaam foretells:

*"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel."*

Whatever the actual astronomical event, what is most important here is that **the Magi recognized the importance of the sign**

and responded in a faithful manner.

They don't have all the details worked out (we see they have to ask for help once they get to Bethlehem) but they recognize the significance of the event.

What's remarkable here is who doesn't recognize.

King Herod was a brilliant and forceful leader over Syria-Palestine for many years. He did much to build up the nation including:

Build aqueducts for fresh water
improved roads and buildings
and built the grandest, most resplendent Temple
Jerusalem had ever seen

But he was deeply paranoid and over come with suspicion.

When ever he perceived a threat to his throne,
he responded quickly and cruelly.

Throughout his life, he had at least one wife and several sons killed because he was afraid of plots to take over the throne.

So when these Magi walk up and start talking about another king,

Herod is anything but overjoyed. It says that

"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

Famous for his maniacal and deeply fearful ways,

when Herod is upset, EVERYBODY is upset!

Obvious, Herod is far too fixated on his throne to see this event for what it truly is.

Because of his fear, he can only see this as a threat.

All he could see is someone eyeballing his throne again.

He is unable to recognize the messiah's coming for what it is.

God come to earth.

We know in the next story, Herod sends his soldiers to kill all the boys in Bethlehem under the age of 2.

But then the folks you think would be the most interested in the coming of the messiah, the priests and scribes, also respond with indifference.

These holy professionals are called in to answer the question about the messiah.

They quoted Micah 5:2, 4: verses commonly attributed to the messiah,

which said the messiah would come out of Bethlehem.

But we hear nothing else from them.

For them, they've seen too many folks jump up and claim they are messiah to take this seriously.

Herod calls the Magi back to share the location,

and also to find out where this so-called messiah is going to be, so he too can deal with him as he's dealt with all the others.

But the Magi doggedly continue their journey, determined to find this "king of the Jews."

And find him they do.

And there, these foreign professors,

these entirely non-Jewish Magi

who set out on nothing but a star and compulsion they couldn't ignore, recognize the child

and do what every human being on earth should do:

worship and bow down before Jesus the King.

Out of all the people, they, the most unlikely candidates,

not even clear about all the details of Jewish messiah,

recognize what's taken place and respond rightly.

And it says they were "overjoyed" but this translation is quite puny compared to the Greek,

For it literally says,

"they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy!"

This was no exercise in academic curiosity for these well-educated scholars.

This had to do with their hearts as well.

And they shower him with lavish gifts.

Gold – fit for a king

Frankincense – used by priests in the temple

Myrrh – the spice used to embalm

When we are met with the news of Christ, we can respond in these ways.

We can reject him, as Herod did,

fearful and hostile of how this king threatens the way we live
Jesus interferes with our well-laid plans.

Having a messiah is deeply inconvenient because to be in
relationship to him, you have to give up selfish things
that cannot happen in a loving relationship.

Sometimes, we get too attached to our vision of things are
not interested in a God who wants more of us.

So we seek to kill that God.

Christians are folks who have given up the “I will do
whatever I like” to dedicate themselves to living for
Christ.

**We can meet the news with indifference, like the so-called
religious folks of the day (the priests and scribes).**

These folks were so caught up in their own rituals,

so hopelessly committed to their own picture of how God is
supposed to work

that they cut themselves off from the possibility that God
just might come in a new and unexpected way.

Some folks are too busy with their own affairs to concern
themselves with a God who wants to break in and bring new life.

Sometimes, we’re just too comfortable with how worldview that
we aren’t interested in change or investigating what God has in
store.

So we simply nod and then brush it to the side.

Or we can do what the Magi did: worship and bow down.

We can lay our most precious gifts at the feet of Jesus

And offer them and our lives to the loving God of the
Universe.

We can get caught up by the wonder and love of God-with-us

And discover exceedingly great joy, as they did.

**And what’s so beautiful about this is that they came to the
wonder and love of Christ, not by academic study or mastery of
Jewish messianic prophecy.**

They did not grow up in relationship to the God of Israel.

But they were willing to set out in search for this God,

willing to **risk everything** on the long and dangerous journey
so as to meet God when he came to earth.

And in so doing, discovered a joy and a peace far more precious
than their precious gifts.

Gold – in honor of the king who rules the world in love

Frankincense – in honor of the priest who would mediate
relationship with God

Myrrh – for the one who will die to save the world.

Are you willing to meet God this way?

Have you been tempted to treat the news of Jesus with
hostility or with the indifference of one who is too busy
to make time for the God of the Universe who came into
time to be with us?

Or do you want to go on the adventure of a life time, knowing
that if you pursue it, you will find the greatest joy you’ve ever
known?

