

Matthew 2:1-12

In Old English they were called kings. “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” goes the song. Our text calls them wise men. In the original Greek the word is magi. And this word is revealing. Magi were a priestly class of scientists especially among the Medes, Persians, and Babylonians. They were the wise men of their day. But their type of wisdom was displeasing to God. They were astronomers, astrologists, and alchemists. They studied dreams and delved into magic.

The magi dwelled in darkness. They would have slept by day and worked at night, for they were studiers of the stars in the night sky. And they also lived in spiritual darkness. Their way of life was contrary to the way of God’s people.

No wonder St. Matthew introduces the magi into his Christmas story with the word “*behold.*” “*Behold!*” he writes. Something extraordinary is happening. Magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem. That’s interesting in itself, but now comes the exclamation point. They are seeking the one who is born king of the Jews!

What? Why? How? This story leaves us with more questions than answers. Yet we are drawn to it. And we should be. For these magi are the first Gentiles God draws to kneel down before the Christ child. But they are not the last. Here today this story is repeated as we Gentiles gather to kneel before the same Christ, to worship Him and offer Him our gifts.

Others might have noticed it. These magi were drawn to it. The star. “*His star,*” they tell Herod. We conclude, as did Herod, that the star appeared when Jesus was born, perhaps six months to a year earlier. But why did the magi conclude that the star signaled the birth of a king?

They were studiers of the stars but not of the Scriptures. Yet they knew something of the Scriptures. They had to have read this passage in Numbers 24:17: “*A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.*” They only place in the Old Testament that links a star to a king. The Holy Scriptures would have been brought to the east six centuries before when the exiles from Judah were taken captive. The magi would have paid attention to this verse about a star and the scepter of a king.

Night after night the magi studied the stars...for nearly six hundred years. And then one night it appeared. How excited these magi would have been. It would have taken months to plan and prepare. But then they depart. Yet traveling only by night, for only at night would the star be able to lead them.

This story teaches us of the mercy of God. He draws strangers to Bethlehem. He leads by the light of a star men who dwell in darkness. God put that star there for them. Had He not, these magi would never have come to worship Jesus. But He did. And God went to a lot of trouble to bring a few men, men who were not His people, to the Christ child.

And God still goes to all this trouble today...for you and me. He calls His people those who were not His people - Gentiles like us. He shows mercy to those who dwell in darkness. And today also he uses natural things, like that star, to lead precious souls to Christ.

Many of you remember Larry Bosworth. He was a stranger from the east: Weldon Spring, and even Virginia before that, who showed up here one Sunday morning some years ago. He was driving around looking for a church. He had become lost. And then he saw it. Not a star, but our steeple. A warm place in the dead of winter, he later told me. And he saw something else. He saw cars in our parking lot. Your cars. And our sign telling him that our 10:00 worship service was about to begin. So he came in, knelt down before the Christ child, worshipped, offering his gifts. And Larry became a faithful and committed church member. And just over four years ago Jesus carried him into heaven. Larry came a long distance every Sunday. But like the wise men, he believed it was worth it. God went to a lot of trouble to lead him here, and He used you to help in doing this.

Some of you have stories just a wonderful. Stories telling how God went to a lot of trouble to lead you to the Christ child. Heart-warming stories that tell of the mercy of God. And in these stories we see God using things like that star to bring you to Jesus.

And all of us share in one beautiful story that likens us to the wise men. For them He combined His clear words in Numbers 24 with something very natural: a star. He did this in your baptism. He combined His clear and gracious words, the words of Christ, with the natural water of baptism. And in this way He led you out of darkness. He led you to the light of Jesus Christ.

When Mary and Joseph saw the wise men coming into the house, falling down to worship Jesus, offering Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts, don't you think they were a little stunned? Yet it would have reinforced what they knew to be true: this baby was the Savior of the world; there was room for all people to kneel down before Him.

And friend, there is room for you. Let these magi teach you that your sinful, dark past does not disqualify you. There is room for you and me because this same Jesus made room on His cross for our sins.

We don't know anything more about these magi. Did they return to their homes and now live a new way of life? Did they live as vessels of God's grace to others, telling of the good news of Jesus? Will we see the magi in heaven? I would think the answer is yes to all of these. For it was God who led them to Jesus. He went to the trouble of bringing them to the Savior.

And this He has done for you. Why would He lead you to Christ if Christ was not for you? Why would He preach this beautiful story of the wise men into your ears if this story was not for you? You, too, are one for whom Jesus was born, suffered, died, and rose again. You have a Savior. Your sins are forgiven.

And now you are able to return to your homes and live as the people you are - God's people in Christ Jesus; sinners who are forgiven; vessels of God's grace to others; people who live not in the darkness, but in the light of Jesus Christ. Amen.