

The Magi's Light

How Christmas Can Light Your Way

Matthew 2:1-12

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Bethany Church

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I have so much fun listening to children's interpretation of what they hear. One Sunday morning I heard a little girl in the church hallway singing the song, "Amen, Brother," which goes: "Amen brother, amen brother, amen brother, amen." She had slightly different words. She sang, "Peanut butter, peanut butter, peanut butter to men." Similarly, a family from Minnesota was visiting a church in Kentucky; and after visiting the Sunday School, the little boy was quizzed by his mother about what he learned. "We talked about who all visited baby Jesus," the little guy said. "Well," the mother asked, "who visited Jesus?" "There were sheep and cows," the boy answered, "and shepherds and firemen." "Firemen," the mother interrupted, "what gave you that idea?" The boy sighed and said, "My teacher, she read from the Bible that these guys came from afar."

I understand the trouble with regional dialects and accents. You don't have to be 7 years old to misinterpret what somebody says, do you? However, some time ago, I learned that without the problem of dialect or accents, we still had some misunderstandings about the Christmas story.

First, most of our Christmas pageants put the wisemen or kings at the manger. The Bible doesn't say that at all. It says they visited the house where Jesus and his mother were. From the way the text reads, it appears that Joseph and Mary found a home in Bethlehem and that Joseph was away working when the Magi visited.

Second, the Christmas story we hear often assumes that there were three wisemen. However, the Bible doesn't tell us how many wisemen visited Jesus. Moreover, we don't know exactly where they lived.

We do know from the Bible that they came from the east because they saw Christ's star. They associated some star with the birth of a special king from Israel. Such belief suggests they were invested in some form of astrology.

The Bible tells us that the wisemen brought three kinds of gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. It also calls these men Magi.

Other sources reveal something about Magi. We know the Greek word Magi is related to the English word magic. Magi were magicians. However, they were not magicians like the modern day ones. Modern magicians are practitioners of illusions and tricks. The Magi performed secret arts, among them, interpreting dreams. Magi pop up

in ancient literature as priests of the Zoroastrian religion who lived in northeast Iran. That is probably where the wisemen's journey began.

When the Magi came to Israel, they were not following a star. They were traveling because of a star. Once they understood the import of the star – that significant, world-changing royalty had been born in Israel – they set out for Israel's royal city, Jerusalem. It was there that they were directed to Bethlehem. Then on the short trip to Bethlehem, the star reappeared. The Magi were overwhelmed. The star led them on that six-mile journey from Jerusalem right to the house where the royal child lived.

The message of these Magi was two-fold. First, with their tongues they declared that a royal child was born. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" they asked. They later identified him as Jesus. Second, with their trip, gifts and homage, they announced that this king's influence would be widespread. Zoroastrian priests in Iran would never pay homage to a Jewish king unless they believed that king would make a difference in their world. Those priests believed in one Supreme Being. They believed that Being would do something significant with that child. They didn't come seeking a holy man who'd bring them inner peace. They honored a king who'd alter the world.

That frightened King Herod. This child could get in his way, disrupt his plans, and threaten his control. He wanted the world rid of Jesus. There are many today who join Herod in that fear. They are frightened by the Magi's message. They don't a king. They're okay with a holy man. They figure that they can't be hurt by what people meditate on and pray to. But that is not what the Magi honored.

Mary and Joseph were encouraged. How awesome it was to host such travelers, hear such stories and receive such gifts. However, the Magi's visit made them vulnerable to an insanely jealous King Herod. They'd spend those fine gifts finding refuge in a foreign country.

For Christ's followers, the Magi's witness would confirm an essential vision. That Christ was born for everyone. He belongs not merely to Israel. He belongs not merely to America, France, or England, but to every nation. He belongs to the Somolians, to the Latinos, to every race and culture.

The Magi remind us that Jesus is the liberator for the whole world. He was born as liberator for every people, of every race, language and religion, in every neighborhood on this globe. The Magi were people of another religion. They weren't Jews. They weren't Christians. God showed them while they were leaders of another religion that this child, Jesus, was for them. Don't think that Jesus is my liberator but maybe not yours. Jesus was born to make a dramatic difference in the experience of every living person.

The Magi reveal that *Jesus' liberation is more than religious or internal.* The Magi didn't come all that way for a little bit of peace. They didn't come all that way for an experience of renewal. That's what they thought their religion would bring them. Indeed, all religions bring their adherents some tangible, valued benefit, or they'd disappear. The Magi came because they understood this child would eventually change the entire world, including theirs in distant Iran. The Magi showed us that this child is greater than all the limits we place on his influence.

The gospel is not good news about a religious belief that offers comfort and peace. It is not good news about some inner harmony. It is not good news about some future trip to heaven. It is the good news about Jesus, the anointed one. All economic authority belongs to him. All military authority belongs to him. All ecological and medical authority belongs to him. All meteorological authority belongs to him. All geological authority belongs to him. All sociological authority belongs to him. All civil authority belongs to him. All moral authority belongs to him. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him.

In the past century Christ has done more than convert individuals. In my doctoral studies, I've learned how Christ intervened in military battles. In the past decade, he has rescued communities from criminals, and transformed their economies. In the past year, thousands have experienced physical as well as spiritual healing in his name.

Christ is not just the Lord of believers, like some meditation guru. He is the Lord of life and its every aspect. If your hope is fixed on a boss's promise, a broker's projection, a doctor's prognosis, a company's contract, you will be disappointed. They at most and at best can only serve as instruments of Jesus' authority. Jesus is your bread for life.

The Magi revealed something else. They showed us that *God cares about everyone from every place*. The first believers didn't realize this. They at first went to only the Jewish people in every place with the gospel. The Magi showed, however, that Jesus was for people of all races and religions. Indeed, *the Father of all sent Jesus to*

bring life for all. If God sent Jesus for all, then why wouldn't he send Jesus' church to all?

God has placed you and me in an international, multi-cultural, many-religioned community. To that kind of world God came not as a bull in a china closet, breaking and condemning people at every turn. He came as a baby, harmless and innocent. He eventually mobilized an army, not to coerce but to liberate. The message of the Magi reveals our Lord's love and life and rule is for all. Will you live in that light? Will the Magi's visit change how you see Christ and your neighbors? Will you be for your neighbors, regardless of their religion or culture, an instrument of Christ's passionate love and powerful healing?