

We Three Kings

(Christmas Story: Act 3)

Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas Story: Act 1 – the birth of the Christ child in a Bethlehem manger

The Christmas Story: Act 2 – the infant Jesus presented in the Temple in Jerusalem

The Christmas Story: Act 3 – the arrival of wise men from the East bearing gifts

I've often wondered if I looked up in the sky, if I could see Jesus' natal star. I can't, but the magi could. These men were astronomers, perhaps magicians from the Babylonian court. They had been waiting for such a sign. In case you are wondering why magi from Babylon would be looking for Christ in the first place, we need to back up a few years to the exile. The people of Judah, where Jerusalem is located, were carried off to Babylon, in the East. There they would share their story of the promised Messiah. The wise men of that area picked up on the story and had done their own investigating. When the "star" appeared, traveling in the direction of Judah, at about the time they calculated this might happen, the magi were "off and running" so to speak to verify that the Messiah had actually been born as predicted.

Did you know there is historical reference to such an occurrence that comes from Chinese astronomers who recorded a comet appearing in 5 BC? A comet would meet the criteria of the star described in Scripture: visible for an extended period of time, long tail, moving toward someplace, and seeming to stand above its destination. Along with recorded history regarding Herod the Great's life and death, the appearance of this "star" would be right on time with the recorded time of Jesus' birth.

Comets can be seen best in the night sky, so it's likely that the magi would have traveled by night and rested during the day. In ancient times you were taking your life in your

own hands to travel at night because bandits roamed the countryside, and they thought nothing of taking your life in addition to your belongings. What would prompt these Gentiles, accustomed to the ease of life in the royal court, to risk life and limb to travel several months to a foreign land under such dire circumstances?

Because they were looking for a king it made sense for them to go directly to the capital city of Jerusalem, where they likely would have arrived at night, or at least in the wee small hours of the morning. I don't know about you, but a knock on my door after dark is likely to cause me concern if I'm not expecting anyone. Now, imagine that you are King Herod. Not only do you have strangers knocking on your door after dark, but they are asking for the king of the Jews. Funny, you thought you were the king of the Jews, even if only a puppet king appointed by Rome. You summon the royal court, the Sanhedrin, consisting of about 72 priests, scribes, lawyers, and lay leaders (perhaps all in their pj's and nightcaps) and ask them where the baby was to be born. With one voice they say, "Bethlehem".

Thousands of years of Jewish history was "staring the group the face" so to speak as the magi inquired about the whereabouts of the Holy Family. Someone comes to the royal court and announces that they have seen "His star" and all these Jewish holy men and highly placed politicians can say is, "he is to be born in Bethlehem". Remember Rand-McNally was not in business yet, there was no MapQuest, or GPS to guide the magi where they needed to go, yet not one of the Jewish leaders showed any interest in leading these foreigners to help them find the Holy Hope predicted through the prophets so long ago. You would think that news of God's long-awaited Messiah arriving almost in their backyard would generate a little more interest on their part.

We have a good idea of why Herod doesn't ask to go along. His mind was already busy trying to figure out how to rid himself of this baby king, this usurper of his position and authority. The members of the Sanhedrin, knowing Herod's murderous nature, wouldn't

dream of doing anything that might call attention to themselves or they, too, might forfeit their lives. So, at this point the only people who seem to be seeking Jesus are Gentiles! Interesting thought, isn't it? God finally delivers on his promise to send a Messiah to the Jewish people, and they don't seem interested in finding out if what the magi said was true.

Imagine the surprise of the magi, after having traveled several months to the place where the Messiah was predicted to be born, only to find out that the people who knew the story best had no idea what they were talking about! Surely in the time it took them to travel from their homeland someone would have caught on to the fact that the Messiah had arrived. But such did not seem to be the case, despite the fact that the shepherds had been spreading the word since the night the angels spoke to them, and Simeon and Anna were not shy about pronouncing Jesus as God's promised Messiah in the Temple when Joseph and Mary came to dedicate him.

Having been dispatched by Herod, the magi continued to follow the "star". Again, this necessitated traveling by night. Under cover of darkness, they might enter Bethlehem without being noticed. No attention would be called to the fact that Joseph and Mary were receiving royal visitors. If the townspeople had seen these fine gentlemen entering the modest abode of Joseph, the carpenter, you can bet that news of the visit would have reached King Herod quickly.

This time, Joseph and Mary are the ones surprised at finding visitors at their door after dark. While Herod might have expected royalty to visit his palace, I doubt Joseph or Mary were prepared for such fine visitors to come to their home. Not only that, but visitors bringing gifts fit for a king. And to top it all off, these fine gentlemen bearing royal gifts then bowed down to worship the baby resting on Mary's knee! They didn't just honor Him as an earthly king with gifts; they honored Him as a Heavenly King with their worship!

What does this story mean for us today? Just as the magi waited for a sign, we often wait for God to send us something tangible as a guide. The magi were open to receiving a sign that came in the dark, and they were willing to set out in the dark to follow God's leading, well aware that there would be risks involved with following His lead. If we think God has sent us a sign in our darkness, do we follow immediately or do we wait until "things get better" or "I have more time"? Or are we willing to set out in the dark, in uncertainty, following the light of God, trusting that He will lead us into the fullness of the light that is Himself?

Are we like Herod and the Sanhedrin, knowledgeable of God's love for us, yet unwilling to reach out for love when it's within our reach? Have we ever turned our backs on God's love because to accept His grace and mercy would mean we would have to humble ourselves before Him? Or are we, like the magi, willing to bow down before Christ and confess He is Lord of all?

Like Joseph and Mary are we ready to open our door to the stranger, rich or poor, and invite them into our community, our church and our homes? Are we welcoming to the stranger at Hatfield Church of the Brethren regardless of their status in life? For it is in our breaking out of our insulated lives that God is able to burst into this time and place with the Good News of Jesus Christ for all of us to hear.

Let's ask ourselves, "Where am I looking for God?" Is it only in the brightly lit places in my life, the times of joy, happiness, safety and good health? Or do I look for Him in the dark places of my life: during illness, after loss, betrayal, or disappointment? And in those times of darkness and frailty, am I willing to follow Him even though there is still darkness? Am I willing to trust that even if the journey seems perilous, that God will lead me safely through the darkness? Like the magi, am I willing to persevere in the darkness for weeks and months if necessary? Can we hold close the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 43:2 (NIV2011)

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

Ask yourself, am I like Herod and the Sanhedrin, unwilling to give Jesus His proper status in my life? Do I prefer to stay where I am, never learning a better way of life, a way to life eternal? We are admonished not to behave that way:

2 Thessalonians 3:6 (NIV2011)

⁶ In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.

When the magi found Jesus, the first thing they did was present him with precious gifts. Am I willing to lay my most precious possessions, relationships, dreams and aspirations at Jesus' feet? As believers, this is what Jesus asks of us:

Matthew 10:37-39 (NIV2011)

³⁷ "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

³⁸ Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me.

³⁹ Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

Just as Jesus gave up his life for our sake, we are asked to give up our life for his sake.

This morning, may we go from this place like the magi: unafraid to set out in the darkness, trusting God's light to show us the way, willing to humble ourselves before kings and paupers, and bearing our finest gifts as an offering to our Heavenly King.

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