



from the desk of . . .

**Rande Wayne Smith**

D.Min., Th.M., M.Div.

**#736**

**1 January 2017**

**Epiphany**

## **FOLLOW THE STAR**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

I'm told that there was a family driving down to Chicago from WI for a holiday get-together just before Christmas. As they passed by one Church there was a manger scene in the yard. Apparently it was the 1<sup>st</sup> one the youngest boy had ever seen.

So he asked his mother ... "Who's that?"

"That's Mary, Joseph, & the Baby Jesus is there in the manger."

The scene really made an impression on the boy. A few blocks further on they passed another Church with a scene depicting the journey of the Wise Men.

"Who are they?" the young boy asked.

His mother replied ... "Those are the Wise Men, who are looking for the Baby Jesus."

The boy thought for a moment. "Well, they're not all that wise," he replied. "They're not going to find Him there. He's down the street at that other Church."

Let's listen now to the story about the Wise Men as recorded by Matthew.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him."

When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"

"In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote:

'Bethlehem in the land of Judah,  
you are by no means the least of the leading cities  
of Judah; for from you will come a leader  
who will guide my people Israel.'"

Herod called the visitors from the East to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and make a careful search for the child; and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him."

And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the East. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.

Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. (Matthew 2:1-12)

**May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen**

The annual observance of the birth of our Savior is almost over. It "officially" ends this coming Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, with the observance of Epiphany. (X) Now, the reality is, today for most people, the term Epiphany means nothing. (For us here at CCRM, when we hear the word our 1<sup>st</sup> thoughts are ... Epiphany Vana ... right?)

In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if the majority of followers of Jesus today say that while they've heard the "liturgical" name, they aren't too sure what it means.

But then, with the mention of the Magi (X) ... they'll quickly recall the story of the 3 Wise Men, (or the 3 Kings), from the East visiting Jesus the night He was born; giving Him gifts of gold, frankincense, & myrrh.

Epiphany, commemorates the visit of the Magi, & it ends the liturgical celebration ...

following the "12 Days of Christmas."

The word "epiphany" means "manifestation." It causes us to remember that God came as a human being in Jesus Christ (John 1:14), & revealed Himself to the Gentiles. As of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Church began recognizing Epiphany as "3 Kings' Day." (X)

Now I've told you all before, these guys really fascinate me. Without a doubt they're the most interesting, & misunderstood, characters in the entire Christmas narrative.

Now the Church is certainly responsible for spreading a lot of the myths & misinformation about them through our music & manmade holiday traditions.

For example, we just sang a few moments ago, (& I love John Hopkins' song), "We Three Kings From Orient Are." Well, they weren't really kings, & they didn't come from the Orient, at least as we use that geographical term today. For us the Orient is China, Japan, Hong Kong, Korea, the Philippines, Viet Nam, Thailand, etc.

But for Matthew, the "East" he was referring to would be present day Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, etc.

Also, there's no way of knowing just how many Magi there were; although most certainly ...  
there were more than 3.

Actually, early Church tradition held that there were 12 of them, even though there's really no Scriptural or historical support for that # either.

3 is the recognized #, mainly because of the 3 gifts.

(Brian has suggested that there were actually 4 Magi, but since the 4<sup>th</sup> ones' gift was a fruitcake ... he's been dropped from the story.)

But as I've said, Scripture simply just doesn't tell us, so we're only left to speculate.

In the Middle Ages the Church actually gave names to these 3 individuals: Caspar ... young, beardless, with a ruddy complexion; Melchior ... a bit older, dark-skinned, & a new beard; & Balthasar ... old, grey hair, & a long beard.

Now, when I lived in Germany, I went to Cologne to see that magnificent gothic cathedral. (X)

And one of the claims to fame of this historic Christian structure is that the skulls of the 3 Magi have been "miraculously" preserved & are supposedly on display in a jewel studded glass case. (X)

The word that Matthew actually uses is (μάγοι) ... magoi. The term literally means "great or powerful ones." These were men of high position & influence. I prefer calling them Magi, rather than "kings" or "wise men" since that more accurately reflects who they were.

Now whatever else these guys did, apparently they made a careful study of the stars. ... Okay, what exactly does that mean? ... Well, today we make a sharp distinction between astronomy, the scientific study of celestial objects, space, & the universe ... & astrology, the worship of those celestial bodies,

based on the idea that they determine human events.

However, those lines were not nearly so clearly defined at the time of Jesus. The Magi were stargazers who incorporated both disciplines into their practices.

And that explains why they would have noticed, & then been so excited about, finding an unusual star in the sky. Upon arriving in Jerusalem they questioned ...

"Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews?  
We saw his star when it came up in the east,  
& we have come to worship him."

The idea that heavenly signs marked the births & deaths of great leaders was widely accepted at that time. What the Magi saw intrigued them; it excited them enough to leave their homeland to follow this star.

Again there's lots of speculation as to what that star was. Kathy & I went to see the "Christmas" show at Adler Planetarium down in Chicago a # of years ago.

They went into great detail in an attempt to explain just what the Magi saw ... possibly a comet, or the configuration of several planets. To be honest, all that seems like conjecture. I prefer to imagine that God was miraculously involved, in much the same way as He led the Jews to the Promised Land with a pillar of fire.

(Nehemiah 9:12)

This leads us to another misconception about the Magi. As I've told you on other occasions, I have a collection of nativity scenes at home. And most of them show Mary & Joseph in a stable, with baby Jesus in a manger. There are shepherds & sheep on one side, & 3 Magi & camels on the other.

Looking at that makes one assume that the Magi showed up on the very night of our Savior's birth.

Again, that idea seems to contradict what Scripture presents ... "the Magi went into the (οικίαν) house & when they saw the (παιδίον) child with his mother Mary." Mary & Joseph are now living in a house, not a stable ... & Jesus is no longer a (βρέφος) baby, but a child.

And, as men of great & powerful influence, the preparations for their journey would have been extensive, possibly taking up to a year.

They would also have traveled in a large caravan. So instead of 3 lone riders on camels, there would have been servants to cook, & even soldiers to protect them as they journeyed through foreign lands.

Most Bible scholars agree that the Magi's journey would have taken at least 4 months.

So, if we put all that together, it seems to go along with Herod's desire to kill all the boys in Bethlehem that were 2 years old & younger, (Matthew 2:16) ...

an age that Jesus might possibly have been by then.

That sentence also helps us understand why "everyone else in Jerusalem was upset" about the Magi's visit.

The truth of the matter was ... everyone walked on eggshells around Herod. (X) He was a deeply disturbed individual, & everybody feared what could happen anytime he felt threatened.

Over the years Herod had killed all his rivals, including: the brother of his wife, the husband of his sister, a trusted friend, one of his 10 wives, his mother-in-law, another husband of his sister, & 3 of his own sons. No one was safe around Herod. He was an evil & dangerous man; certainly one to be avoided.

In any event, these Magi had made a dramatic commitment of time to search for this new king.

The gift of time is one of the most precious things that we can give to Jesus. That may be one of the greatest messages the Magi have for us ...  
giving time to the Lord.

The other thing that we quickly notice is that these 3 or 4 or 12, or however many Magi there were, met God in the midst of their normal daily activities;  
they were at their work when God gave them a "sign".

God is not limited to meeting with us in a certain place or at a certain hour.

God can & does speak to us anywhere & at any time.

The lesson for us is to be constantly prepared ... to be always alert for what God has for us in this life. In other words, God may have something for us when we least expect it. So the 1<sup>st</sup> message is to be alert ...  
& the 2<sup>nd</sup> is to have a willingness to take action.

The Magi could have noted the appearance of the star in their charts ... & done nothing more. They could have indicated that this phenomenon probably heralded something very special ...

& then gone back to their normal daily activities.

But no ... they put a commitment to their conviction. They put feet to their faith ... & they set out on a journey. When God presents us with a new opportunity, are we willing to get up & begin a journey of faith?

The story of the Magi helps us to see that there's something special, something remarkable that awaits us at the end of our journey. (Deuteronomy 4:29)

Now one of the many things that intrigue me about this story is the incredible "wrong turn" these guys took as they neared the end of their travels. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem ...

they stopped in Jerusalem to ask directions of Herod.

(Actually, there are those who suggest that this is the real reason why the Magi are famous. They're the only men in history known to stop & ask for directions.)

But to be honest, their visit with Herod shouldn't be a surprise. After all, they were on a journey to see the new "king of the Jews" ... presumably his newborn son.

In 40 B.C., the Roman Senate had given Herod the title ... "King of the Jews" ... so, it would naturally be assumed, to any foreign visitors,

that his son would one day be his successor.

But as I've already said, Herod was a very jealous & suspicious individual. So, upon hearing that there now might be a rival for his throne ... even though this baby couldn't possibly be a serious contender to him for years & years & years ... Herod didn't want to take any chances. He met secretly with the Magi,

searching for information.

So, when the Magi questioned ... "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews?" Herod "called together all the chief priests & teachers of the Law & asked them, 'Where will the Messiah be born?'"

And their immediate response ...

"In the town of Bethlehem in Judea ... for this is what the prophet wrote:

'Bethlehem in the land of Judah,  
you are by no means the least of the leading cities  
of Judah; for from you will come a leader  
who will guide my people Israel.'"

At which point Herod deceptively said to the Magi ...

"Go & make a careful search for the child;  
& when you find him, let me know,  
so that I too may go & worship him."

Obviously, Herod had no intention of worshipping Jesus. He just wanted the Magi to do his dirty work & find the child so that he could do what he always did ...  
kill this person who threatened his power.

At that point, the Magi had no idea they were being used by Herod, so they proceeded to Bethlehem to do what they had set out to do from the very beginning ...  
worship Jesus.

Now, let's not jump over this thought too quickly.  
There's an important theological truth here.

The Magi found their way when they went to the Scriptures. Let's say that together ... (*The Magi found their way when they went to the Scriptures.*)

So, think this through with me ... where is God leading us in our journey of faith? ... We don't have to guess. The answers are found in the pages of this Book. And I know I've said this at least 5,280 times ... this is not a history Book, it's a theology Book!

God gives us direction for our lives in this Book.

The Scriptures were clear about where Jesus could be found (*Micah 5:2*) ... & the Magi were back on course. And when they located Him in Bethlehem ...

"they knelt down & worshipped him."

Wow! ... What a scene that must have been! Imagine these Magi ... powerful & influential men ... & Gentiles to boot ... knelling before this Child;

acknowledging Him as the Lord of their lives!

Then "they brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, & myrrh." (X)

This is one of the ways that we continue to worship Jesus today. Each week we include a time to give an offering of our valuable material possessions. It's a practical & tangible way to show our adoration of Jesus. Obviously we do it with our money, while the Magi's gifts represented what was most valuable to them.

There's also a lesson for us in these gifts that were given ... gold, frankincense, & myrrh. In fact, it would appear that God Himself had inspired their offerings.

These gifts also had important symbolic meaning, some of which the Magi probably hadn't even considered.

There's no doubt that they understood that gold was a gift fit for a king. Even today, gold has tremendous value, & it would have been no different back then.

It has often been pointed out that when the Magi brought gold to Jesus, they were being used by God to provide the necessary funds for Joseph to take the child & His mother to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt on His life. (Matthew 2:13)

That's probably true ... but it's far overshadowed by the significance of the gift itself. Jesus Christ was a King, (John 18:36), as the Magi were 1<sup>st</sup> to recognize.

He was the King of kings. (The Revelation 19:16)

Jesus may have been born as the "king of the Jews" ... but these Gentile Magi were demonstrating that He was their king as well.

But there were 2 other gifts that we're a little less familiar with: frankincense & myrrh.

Frankincense came from the boswellia tree that grew in Arabia.

It was used as a fragrance /perfume, & it also had medicinal uses. But its' main use was in Temple worship. (Exodus 30:34-38) It was mixed with the oil that was used to anoint the priests. (Exodus 30:30) And it was part of the bread offerings of thanksgiving to God. (Leviticus 24:7)

Since incense gave the offering its' pleasant odor, Paul was probably thinking of it when he wrote about the gifts of the Philippians ... "They are like a sweet-smelling offering to God, a sacrifice which is acceptable & pleasing to him." (Philippians 4:18)

In presenting this gift, the Magi are pointing to Christ as our great High Priest, (Hebrews 4:14) ... the one whose whole life was acceptable & pleasing to His Father.

Myrrh, which certainly is the strangest of the 3 gifts, was taken from the small thorny myrrha tree & was used for embalming because of its' ability to mask the odor of a decomposing body.

We get an idea of how important myrrh was in the ancient world as we read Scripture. For instance, for Jesus' burial Nicodemus & Joseph used ... "100 lbs. of spices, a mixture of myrrh & aloes." (John 19:39)

Now if 100 lbs. of that combination were used for just one body, there must have been a tremendous amount of myrrh constantly being bought & sold for funeral arrangements.

In The Revelation we read about the city of Smyrna. That name is actually the Greek word (Σμύρνη) for myrrh. The city was called Smyrna because the manufacture of myrrh was its' chief industry.

Now, by any human measure it would be odd, if not offensive, to present the child Jesus a spice used for embalming. But it wasn't in this case ... nor was it odd.  
It was a gift of faith.

We don't know what the Magi may have known or guessed about Jesus' future ministry, but we do know that the O.T. again & again foretold of His suffering.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm describes His death by crucifixion. Actually, Jesus quoted part of that Psalm when He cried from the cross ... "My God, my God,  
why did you abandon me?" (Matthew 27:46)

And then, there's Isaiah's prophecy ...

"But he endured the suffering that should have been ours, the pain we should have borne. All the while we thought that his suffering was punishment sent by God.

But because of our sins he was wounded,  
beaten because of the evil we did.

We are healed by the punishment he suffered,  
made whole by the blows he received." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

Jesus was to suffer, to die for sin. It was myrrh that symbolized that aspect of His ministry.

So, the gold represented Jesus' royalty.

The frankincense represented Jesus' divinity.

And the myrrh represented Jesus' death for us.

These were gifts given with care & adoration of this newborn King.

The Magi were about to return to Herod in response to his request to let him know where he could find Jesus, when God intervened. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod,

they returned to their own country by another road.

Herod treated the birth of Jesus with displeasure because it threatened his position, his power, & his plans. Now, while most people in our culture today wouldn't go as far as Herod in their resentment toward Jesus ... many, too, go to great lengths to make sure that they remain the ruler of their own lives rather than submit to the kingship of Jesus. What about you? ...

And so, people of Community Church, the Magi teach us to be ready to meet God in the midst of our everyday activities ... & to be willing to put commitment to our conviction ... & to let Scripture permeate our very being.

Where is the light of that star leading us in 2017? Please, please be open to the transforming power of The Holy Spirit. Then, let us rise up & follow the star!

**MARANA THA**