

WHEN THEY SAW THE STAR

Matthew 2:1-12

Dr. Trevor Brown

*A sermon preached for First Baptist Church of Amarillo
January 5, 2020*

Singing the 12 Days of Christmas

You are looking at “Nine Ladies Dancing.” No, not literally. Surely you know everyone’s favorite (or least favorite) Christmas song. Four calling birds, three French hens... and so on. Maybe you have a tradition like this: every year in our extended family gathering we had to sing. My grandmother led it. She was musical, played the piano.

Her grandchildren were going to sing before any one opened a present. And we all, of course, said “yes ma’am.” Some years there would be song books. Some years were off the cuff. It might be accompanied on the piano. It might have to a capella. You might get picked to lead the songs. You never knew.

You can imagine her elation when her four sons rounded out the family cast with an even dozen, for a time. Twelve grandchildren. You know what that means? A part for everyone. We all had to line up, oldest to youngest, to sing the whole 12 Days of Christmas – which takes 12 days. And as the ages happen to fall, I didn’t get “4 calling birds” or “3 French hens”. I wasn’t center stage for “5 golden rings.” I was stuck with “nine ladies dancing.” Not exactly a young boy’s dream solo!

The 12 days of Christmas isn’t just that funny song. They line up with those 12 days marked off for the celebration of Christmastide. Some traditions pay more attention to a church calendar than others, but the song reflects the Christmas celebration, of which today marks that 12th day.

It wasn’t until 3 centuries after Jesus’ birth the Romans nailed down December 25th as Christmas Day, lining it up with the Winter solstice. Prior to that it was a celebration called Epiphany that was more prominent in Christian circles. It’s a celebration of the revealing of the Son of God, at his baptism, at the wedding at Cana, and especially, the revealing of Christ to the Magi – our text today.

Who are these Magi?

These visitors from the East have long captivated our imaginations. They appear only in Matthew, but they’ve had cameos in live nativities ever since. They don’t get many lines, but boy have they have they gotten some elaborate costumes through the years.

Christians have been trying to nail down their identity for centuries. The term *magi* is the precise Greek word used in Matthew’s gospel. History shows that the Magi were astrologers and interpreters of omens—following a star and dreaming dreams. When they arrived in

Jerusalem, their bluntness had King Herod spitting out his morning coffee:ⁱ ***“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Matt. 2:2)***

So Matthew puts before us, the first worshippers of Jesus not as his own, but gentiles who follow God’s light. As early as 200 AD, Tertullian was laying out arguments that the Magi, while astrologers by trade, were considered kings. Other translations have chosen the to call them wise men.

John Calvin felt strongly about anyone who would label them “three kings”: “Beyond all doubt, they have been stupefied by a righteous judgment of God, that all might laugh at [their] gross ignorance.” 1st-century author/philosopher Pliny the Elder wrote several chapters about the Magi where they sound more like something from a Harry Potter novel. He details their skill in magic arts—including pouring boiled earthworms in the ear to cure a toothache!

Somewhere along the way tradition even gave them names: Balthasar, Caspar, and Melchior. Matthew, of course, doesn’t offer this, and the fact that there was even three of them isn’t here, but is assumed only by the fact that they brought three gifts. Mathew has them visiting the home, but not in Luke’s manger nativity.

They were most likely men from Babylon, long known for its attention to the stars. Ancient magi were persons fabled to be skilled at astronomy as well as various occult arts, such as astrology, interpretation of dreams, fortune telling, and magic. Here they are clearly thought of as astronomers or astrologers, who have found the rising of a star to be of world-historical significance. It was a common idea in ancient times that the birth or death of great men was accompanied by heavenly signs. They’re like explorers who have set off to discover something new.

Discovering By Mistake

The “Age of Discovery” was riddled with Explorers who discover by mistake:ⁱⁱ

- *Christopher Columbus - The first (and most famous) expedition reached Cuba and Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and his second journey explored other islands in the Caribbean; on both occasions, he returned to Europe convinced he had just visited the Chinese coast. His final voyage failed to yield discovery of the Indian Ocean—which makes sense, considering he landed in Central America.*
- *Juan Ponce De Leon - gathered some men and set sail to this mythical isle of Bimini he heard about in the hope of finding a fountain of youth. Instead, they landed in Florida, which today boasts more retired Americans than any other US state. How’s that for irony?*
- *John Cabot – He believed the westward journey to Asia would be shorter from Northern. When Cabot and his crew reached what is now the eastern coast of Canada (most likely Nova Scotia or Newfoundland), they promptly congratulated themselves on a voyage to Asia well done.*

- *Henry Hudson - Hudson's three voyages were still a disappointment; his ultimate goal was to locate a 'Northeast Passage' that directly connected European trading vessels to the Asian mainland, which he was unable to find for one simple reason: it didn't exist.*
- *Robert de la Salle – one ship wrecked in Matagorda bay looking for the mouth of the Mississippi.*

The Magi set out looking for the king of the Jews and have landed with Herod instead. The difference between these and those lost explorers is that these magi have already come to realization that they're shipwrecked, hopeless, lost without some divine intervention. Why else would you spend all that time searching the stars if not because you knew your answers from above?

Brennan Manning writes: "In this weakness and poverty it is the shipwrecked at the stable who will come to know the love of God."ⁱⁱⁱ It is those who realize their deep need, who have hurt enough to seek out healing, who have wept enough to scour the earth for a new hope.

I wonder: Do you know that you're lost enough to need a guiding light? To follow God's guiding light, you have to know that you need one!

Soren Kierkegaard said "The three Kings had only a rumor to go by. But it moved them to make that long journey. The scribes were much better informed, much better versed. They sat and studied Scriptures like so many dons, but it did not make them move. Who had the more truth? The three kings who followed a rumor, or the scribes who remained sitting with all their knowledge?"^{iv}

In the Time of Herod the Great

So, Matthew is deliberate in telling us that the wise men come *in the time of Herod the Great*.

We don't even meet them before being reminded in this turn in the narrative that he is in power. From that moment on the contrast has begun. For all the wisdom attributed to these men from the East who have found this star to be of such world-historical significance that they would set out to follow it, Herod the Great seems to have none. For all their wonder at the star, Herod knows only fear. In fact, history doesn't just deem him unwise. He's well known to be cruel and unjust.

He was a foreigner, a puppet king set up by the Romans, a pretender to the throne of David. His personal life was in shambles. He had several wives and sons, some of whom he ordered murdered because he feared that they were plotting against him. The emperor Augustus, in a Greek play on words, is remembered to have said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son. The pig in the barnyard had a better hope of survival.

So, it's no surprise, I suppose, when Matthew tells us Herod's response. The magi share why they have come, that a star has led them to come and worship a new born King of the Jews, Herod is troubled – he is disturbed – agitated, and *all Jerusalem with him*.

What inspired the magi to journey to the light is unnerving for them. Ellen Davis^v points out: **When Herod heard about the one whose star had risen in the East, “the one born king of the Jews,” he felt his unstable throne shake beneath him. He could read that sign as well as the Magi; it meant that his own days were numbered. So, consumed with fear, Herod launched a desperate new security program.**

First, he tried a closely targeted operation, a quick fix. He tried to get the Magi to give him the baby’s exact whereabouts. But when the Magi evaded him, then Herod settled for a general slaughter, killing every child in and around Bethlehem, two years old and under.

Herod could not have secured the deaths of all those children, if he were the only one who was afraid. Matthew reminds that fear is powerful and contagious. It can become an epidemic, like it did that year in Jerusalem.

“Herod was terrified, and all Jerusalem with him.”

When Herod saw that star, all he could manage to see was bad news. All Jerusalem could see was uncertainty, newness, change. **Fear spreads like plague through an unhealthy system, infecting not only those who are powerless to defend themselves—the Jewish families in Bethlehem—but also infecting the relatively powerful, the ruling élite in Jerusalem, who sensed how fragile their power was.**

So Matthew is giving us an artful picture of two opposed entities: on the one hand Herod and all Jerusalem, and on the other the Magi, following the promise of God and one bright point of light as they travel in a country not their own.

If we read the story deeply and honestly, I think we have to admit that we relate both with fearful Jerusalem and with hopeful Magi; They both reveal things about us that we have not seen clearly before.

In that picture of Herod and all Jerusalem there is judgment for us. Matthew holds it before us like a mirror, challenging us to acknowledge our fear. It’s fear that cripples us when the light calls us forward. When God calls us into new things, when the road is unfamiliar, when following him means giving up control, when his power comes in ways we don’t care for, when he chooses to reveal himself most clearly to an outsider first.

Its fear that slows us down when the Spirit points a direction we didn’t plan for. Its fear that cripples us when we think we’re unlovable or unforgivable or just not worth the time. Its fear that leads to stereotype or dismiss or diminish others. Its fear that lets us push back the light so that we can keep on living with ourselves on the throne.

Herod is terrified, *and all of us with him.*

Yet, Matthew does not leave us to despair. Alongside that mirror is a second one— the Magi.

Verse 10 reads, “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”
“Seeing the star stop, the Magi were wildly happy” — but why?

Because, when you stop to think about it, there is no obvious reason those astrologers from the East should have been so wildly excited. After all, they hadn’t seen that much that ordinary eyes would interpret as a revelation of God. They had seen a star rising in the East, a tiny point of bright light. And because they were trained to take the heavenly bodies very, very seriously, they followed it, probably hundreds of miles, nearly 900: from Mesopotamia (the ancestral home of astrologers) across the northern edge of the Syrian desert, down into Roman Palestine, until they got to Bethlehem. And when they finally get to the place where it stops, through the maze of narrow streets, they stand at one incredibly average house looking at a Jewish mother and her newborn child.

And at that point those Magi “rejoiced with a really, really big joy,” as the Gospel literally reads. “And coming into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and falling down, they worshipped him.”

Those highly educated foreigners, distinguished enough to be summoned for a private consultation with King Herod—they were the very first ones to worship our Lord. The Light of the World made known to gentiles. “And opening their treasures, they presented him” with tribute fit for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They took that baby for the real thing, “the one born king of the Jews,” whose birth prophets had foretold—yet remember, they had heard no angel choir (again, that’s in Luke’s Gospel).

What is it that causes them to *rejoice exceedingly with great joy*?

One March afternoon, almost 15 years ago, a Texas high school bus full of a girls soccer team swerved unexpectedly at an object in the road and turned over in a violent crash. The bus turned over, slid down the road, and came to rest in a nearby ditch. Along with the injured, 2 high school girls didn’t survive. One of them was my cousin. She was our 11 Pipers Piping.

In some ways, the tradition of lining up oldest to youngest was always going to end somewhere. We would grow up, or our grandmother would pass away. We could do what all parents do: have our own children and make them do the song and dance.

But its hard to keep singing when your Christmas song loses a part. But isn’t this exactly the reason we need the Christ child? And for all their searching these Magi know that life is hard, and broken, and far from what God intends. You know it too. Whether in loss, or in addiction, or in disease, or in broken relationships, or in hidden sin. These Magi know that they’re shipwrecked, lost, grasping in the dark and without hope.

Until they have met the Christ. Until God makes himself known to them, revealing his light to the gentiles. Declaring once and for all that there is hope!

Davis reminds us: The message of Epiphany is not “God is born in Christ, and all’s well with this old world.” Thank God that’s not the intended message. Looking at our world, who would believe it? The message is not even “Jesus is born, and all’s well with us who believe in him.” Thank God that’s not the message. Who even among us would believe it?

No, this is the message of Epiphany: *“Jesus the Christ is born into our world, and for us who believe in him, there is a clear focus for our hope.”*

Isaiah 9:2 saw it coming: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.”

When they saw the star had stopped, why are they overwhelmed with joy? Because they’ve found the hope we need!

Look at them: those 3 or 5 or 30 travelers in a country not their own, in a land literally governed by fear. Their hope in what God has revealed empowers them to avoid being coopted by Herod’s reign of terror. As the Proverbs say, “The hope of the righteous is gladness.”

Herod saw the star and was terrified. But when they saw the star they knew they were watching the light of the world break into the darkness they had known.

John 1:5 read, “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Having experienced the surpassing joy of Bethlehem and knowing it came from God, the Magi listened to the dream that also came from God and warned them not to return to Herod. Instead they “departed by another road for their own country.” Matthew is showing us a way forward in this new year, where each day we are given the chance to be led by hope or fear. He challenges us to be the community of hope that the church has been, he tells us, from the very beginning.

Matthew’s Gospel challenges us to live boldly in the hope of the Magi, so that having rejoiced with them at the first coming of Christ, we may at his second coming know fullness of joy forevermore. 1 John 5 reads, “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.”

And the scripture tells us that not only has God’s light been born into this world but there is now hope for a world to come. As Revelation 21:23-24 paints the pictures of God’s new heavens and new earth as a “city [that] has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp *is* the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.” Fear and despair will not have the last word.

So, Matthew implores us just a few chapters later. As you look to the light, as you look to Jesus, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

I wonder: have you looked up lately? Do you know that you need a guiding light? Have you been captive to fear, or are you - with the Magi - filled with joy and gladness at the sight of Jesus Christ, our hope?

In the words of Isaiah 60, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you."

So, walk in that light.

ⁱ Chad Ashby, "Magi, Wise Men, of Kings? It's Complicated." *Christianity Today*, Aug 8, 2008.

ⁱⁱ "8 Explorers Who Changed History By Getting Lost" <https://blog.theclymb.com/out-there/8-explorers-changed-history-getting-lost/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Brennan Manning, "Shipwrecked at the Stable," *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, 184.

^{iv} Soren Kierkegaard, *Meditations from Kierkegaard*.

^v Inspiration and quotes in this sermon used from Ellen F. Davis, "Stargazers," January 5, 2003, in William Willimon, *Sermons from Duke Chapel: Voices From a Great Towering Church*.