

## Several Sagacious Persons from Persia

Matthew 2:1-12

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### Scene 1: Magi Came From the East to See the Light

“We three kings of orient are!” We do not know really how many there were. We think there were three only because there were three gifts. And no where does scripture call them kings. We do not know precisely where they are from, but we know they are not from Judea, maybe Persia in present day Iran. And here is another shocker. The NRSV says wise men. Wise guys. But the Greek word Magi cannot be literally translated as wise guys. The Greek word for Magi is genderless. They could have been women! Well, if it is unwise to call the Magi men, perhaps we should change the title of the song from “We three kings,” to “We several sagacious persons!” or, “We unnumbered strange astronomers!”

2000 years ago, several strangers, several astronomers, came from parts unknown. So what were these visitors, these strangers, doing? Why were they making such a long trip from Persia to Palestine? I think it is because they were hungry. They were spiritually hungry. What they had in their home town and in their own life was not satisfying to them. So they came to see the light. They came to see Jesus. They came to have an epiphany.

So what is Epiphany?

Outside the church, epiphany means revelation. Inside the church, Epiphany means the revelation of God in Jesus. During the season of Epiphany, we have the revelation of Jesus to the Gentile world, that is, the Magi from Persia. And we have the revelation of Jesus as the anointed son of God on the day of his Baptism. The season of Epiphany marks the early days of Jesus’ life and ministry.

As Isaiah says, “Arise, for your light has come.” The star of Bethlehem guides the magi to Jesus, the light of the world. A church can be like that. A place where you and I come to find the light.

There are two theories of listening to scripture. One way is for you to hear scripture as a safe harbor for the sailboat of your soul. A safe harbor from the howling winds during the other 6 days of the week. Where not just you, but also what you are doing and thinking are affirmed. But scripture interpreted purely as affirmation of what you already think and do is not an epiphany. No transformation occurs when all you are listening for is affirmation.

Another theory of listening to scripture, is where scripture challenges you to patch the holes in the sail of your personal theology. Patching the holes in the sail which is your view of the world, so you can better withstand the stormy blast on Monday. If scripture is used merely to affirm not just you, but also a world view that is broken, then you will be as beat up at the end of next week as you were this week. But if the holes in your world view can be repaired through the transformative power of prayer, scripture, and worship, then you have truly seen the light. You have truly had an epiphany. Do not misunderstand what I am saying here. Scripture does affirm your inherent goodness. In scripture, Jesus affirms your goodness, but then challenges your world view, turning it upside down.

As Isaiah says, “Arise, for your light has come.” The star of Bethlehem guides the magi to Jesus, the light of the world. A church can be like that. A place where you and I come to find the light. Where you and I come to find Jesus. Where you and I come to have an epiphany. But not everyone sees the light in Bethlehem. Isaiah says, “Arise, for your light has come.” But not everyone sees it. Seeing the same star as the magi, he does not have an epiphany. Sometimes, when all we are looking for is personal affirmation, we also do not see the light.

## Scene 2: Herod Could Not See the Light Even Though It Was In His Neighborhood

Herod was scared to death. After all, he had fought hard to ascend the throne of Roman puppet king. And had fought hard to keep it. For him, might is right. He killed wives and sons and anyone else who threatened him or disagreed with him. Augustus Caesar said of this Jewish king who would not eat pork, that it was safer to be a pig than to be one of his sons! He was a fierce and arrogant warrior. Physically powerful but unloved. Wealthy in possessions and gold, but merciless and stingy. When the magi come to him, to ask him where is the light of the world, he does not have a clue, even though Bethlehem was only 5 miles away.

No wonder he could not recognize the light of the world. Because in Jesus, God turns the world upside down. In Jesus, God comes to us as a baby in a feeding tray for animals. Jesus then walks among those his culture rejects, even people who deny being his friend. Finally, he suffers and dies on a cross between two thieves, the object of derision.

Unlike Herod the Great, Jesus does not come to us as a warrior, but in humility and weakness. Born in humility, Jesus comes to rule over all with love, tumbling down the walls of hostility which divide us. Helpless as an infant, Jesus shows the power of God's love. Poor in things of the world, Jesus brings the wealth of God's grace. Rejected by many, Jesus welcomes all who seek him. Jesus' resurrection by God shows humankind that no one is beyond the power of God's reconciliation. Jesus' way is Matthew 25 and 28. His truth is love. His judgment is mercy. And his life is the life abundant.

Although I believe none of us are ruthless or merciless or stingy, we also are sometimes as blind as Herod. You and I sometimes cannot see Jesus in the hungry, the thirsty, or the sick. You and I sometimes cannot see Jesus in the stranger. You and I sometimes cannot even see Jesus in each other. Like Herod, we sometimes fail to see the light.

## Scene 3: Magi Found the Light, and Carried it Out with Them Into the World

It has been said the Magi were not really wise. If they were wise, they would have given Jesus and his family something they could have used, like candles, soap, and diapers, not frankincense and myrrh!

One of my favorite Christmas stories is the short story by O'Henry entitled "The Gift of the magi." You remember it. It is about a young, very poor, couple who lived in New York City during the turn of the century. They wanted so deeply to give a wonderful gift to one another, but, alas, they had no money. So the young man went out and sold his only valuable possession, his watch, to buy a barrette for his wife's beautiful long hair. You can imagine the surprise on his face when on Christmas morning he discovered that she had cut her hair and sold it to buy a chain for his watch.

The point of the story is, of course, that what is given is not nearly as important as the motivation for giving. We may think that what ever spiritual and material gifts we have to give to Jesus and to his church are useless and insignificant. The important thing, however, is our inward sincerity in wanting to give ourselves to God.

### Conclusion

The magi found Jesus, the light of the world, in Bethlehem, and carried this light in their hearts from Bethlehem to the rest of the world. My hope today is that you can find Jesus in our church today, and carry Jesus with you the rest of the week. My hope is that, like the several sagacious persons from Persia, you will search to find Jesus each and every day. And my hope is that, like the unnumbered strange astronomers of 2000 years ago, that you will have an epiphany each and every day.

Glory be to God, hallelujah, and all God's people say ...