

"Outsiders and Wise Men"

Luke has shepherds in his telling of the birth of Jesus. They heard something extraordinary from the angel of the Lord and came into Bethlehem to find the newborn savior. Matthew has the magi - curious foreign characters who, guided by an extraordinary star, "traverse afar" with their special gifts. Matthew's unique story of the magi has captured the imaginations of children and artists, believers and seekers. In many nativity scenes the wise men [and their regal retinue] crowd out the shepherds in front of the holy family. What is it that they contribute to the Christmas story and to our faith?

A little background will help answer that question. The Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy tracing Jesus' ancestry through David and back to Abraham. Jesus inherits the covenant made with Abraham in which God chose Abraham's descendants for a special mission: to be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:1-3). Jesus also inherits the covenant made with David in which God establishes David's descendants upon the throne of Israel (2 Samuel 7). As son of David, Jesus is the one to restore the kingdom; as son of Abraham, Jesus is the one through whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. His family tree shows that Jesus is for Israel and also for all people.

The magi are the first people from outside Israel to be blessed by Jesus. They are not Jews. They are not local. They are not even named. They are outsiders. They are the first to come from the ends of the earth to worship Jesus and call him Lord. Jesus is for Israel but also a blessing for all people.

These outsiders are in sharp contrast to King Herod and the chief priests and the teachers of the law. These Jewish political and religious authorities are insiders. They have the palace, the temple, and the positions of privilege. They even have the scriptural clue provided by the prophet Micah that the Messiah will come from Bethlehem. If anyone should know about Jesus, they should. Yet they do not recognize anything significant has happened until they hear about it from the magi; and they interpret Jesus' birth as a threat. [Of course, this will not be the only time in the Gospel of Matthew that the insiders will get it wrong and the outsiders will figure it out; but it is the first time.]

The magi come because they have seen the star that leads them to the place of the newborn king. Though there have been astronomical explanations of the star that led them to the exact place where the child lay, the star really defies rational explanation. Through this sign, God invites these outsiders to find the Savior.

Rather than simply observing a brightness in the heavens the magi see something that compels them to go, ask, and discover. The first word these wise men speak is, "Where?" (2:2). It is the question all seekers have asked ever since. We see something different, experience something beyond and better from the ordinary, so we inquire and wonder, and perhaps even follow. The star is a symbol of grace, inexplicably placed by God in the right way and at the right time, unnoticed except to those paying attention. Like the star, grace exists beyond the bounds of text and tradition so that the outsiders might just as well experience it as those who know the story by heart. God may invite people outside our normal church circles to find Him. And if we're ready we might well play a part, like that star, and invite them to continue the journey to the Savior. It all depends on where you are looking and what you are looking for. Often it is as simple as saying, "You know, something like that happened to me... and this is what God has been doing in my life."

The story continues: the Bible says the magi "knelt down and paid him homage." They worshipped the One born as Christ, and fittingly offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It all appears as plain old, dumb-founded worship. Having humbled themselves before a tiny child, did they thus forfeit their credentials as "wise" men? Would their colleagues look upon them as having betrayed their training and position by falling down before a babe in a stable? They came as wise men; but did they leave as fools? The Bible doesn't dwell on this, but we can surmise. The Magi gave tangible gifts, but they also gave more. By not reporting back to Herod the location of the newborn king the Magi gave Jesus his life, and a chance to grow up and fulfill his unique mission. It looks to me like they were truly wise men - they did not return home by the same route they came. Their lives had been changed - most likely because of a gift they had received.

Christmas has so become identified with gift giving and receiving. Sometimes it can be a burden or a disappointment. The best gift we can receive is Christ himself and the best gift we can give follows the example of the magi: allow Christ to grow. St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, speaks of the gift of God's grace given through Jesus Christ - it is the same gift to all who will receive it. It is a gift of grace and a gift of an assignment: to serve in the salvation of the nations - the inheritance of Abraham. It is the gift of that high calling to give ourselves, that Christ may grow in others and that others may grow in Christ. It begins with answering a simple question, "What difference has Jesus made in your life?" When you form an answer to that, you will have a witness to share with others.

Rather than celebrating his own salvation St. Paul admitted that it was by God's grace that he was able to live for Christ; and he was pleased to take his witness to the Gentiles, those outside the family of Israel. [When our modern American culture expresses a theology, it usually includes "We're all God's children." This theology also floods the church. It's not accurate. The Bible does not call all humans God's children. We are God's *creatures*. Only when we consciously accept the gift of Christ and receive him as Savior are we adopted into God's family through Jesus the unique son.]

We do not have to make the journey to Christ's manger all alone. The company of fellow seekers brings courage and endurance. Together we can pray, "Lord, enable me by your Spirit to do your will this day and to grow in knowledge and love of you," and then together we can bend mind and heart and strength and to walk the Christian way. When we do that, we go home by a different route - as did the Magi - after bowing before the Savior.

Matthew actually concludes this story of the wise men at the end of his gospel. There (Mt. 28), Jesus - now risen from the dead - commissions his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:16-20). From his birth, Jesus has attracted people from beyond the nation of Israel and the religion of Judaism. His charge to his disciples at the end of the story seeks to fulfill the promise given to Abraham. By teaching the nations "to observe all that I have commanded you," the disciples will make Jesus a blessing to all people.

As we give of ourselves to God's great purposes, God's revelation in Christ is made known to the world. He is the savior of the whole world. He is the one who beckons all to come, regardless of how far away we might be.

Wise men and wise women still seek him. They still search for him, find him and forsake their old ways to follow him.

