

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

January 7, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

The Amazing Magi

The magi are probably some of the best known and least known people in the Bible. Nearly everyone know about the magi, or wise men; probably from that song, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Still, we do not know what country they were from. It probably was not the orient. We do not know if there were 3 or 13 or 30 of them. We do not know what their names or ages were. We do not know if they traveled by night to follow the star and arrived in the morning. We do not know how long they stayed in Bethlehem. We do not know if they had an interpreter with them. We do not even know if they used camels or if they had a large group of servants with them. Matthew could have answered all those questions and more, but he did not. He only told us what is truly important for us to know about the magi. And as we look at Matthew’s account, we will see that the magi are amazing.

Called by God

Many scholars have wasted a lot of ink trying to figure out what star the magi followed. Most suggest it was a convergence, or cluster, of stars and planets which looked especially bright. The easiest is to say that God put a special star in the sky for the magi to see. It was a miracle. It seems that **SOMEHOW**, the magi heard of Balaam’s prophecy in our first lesson from Numbers 24 that a star would come out of Jacob. It’s a likely guess that they also had access to Genesis 49 where Jacob said that an eternal ruler would come from the Jews. Maybe Daniel or someone else put a copy of the Old Testament in a library and they read it. Maybe some wandering Jew shared those prophecies with the magi. Again, we don’t know.

We do know that the magi saw the star shining in the dark sky and knew it indicated that a boy was born who would be a special King of the Jews and the Savior of the world. They first traveled to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. King Herod did not know anything about a new-born king so he consulted with the chief priests and teachers of the law, the theological experts of the day. They had no trouble pointing to Micah 5:2 which said that the promised Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So, the magi headed 7 miles south to Bethlehem.

Here’s a few other things we don’t know. Why didn’t anybody else notice the star and make the connection that the Savior had been born? Why didn’t the priests and teachers of the law rush to Bethlehem to see the Messiah they were waiting for? We do know why the magi went. It was grace – unasked, unforced, unearned, unexpected love from God. Grace is not just a loving

feeling, it also has power. It makes things happen. With whatever nuggets of God’s Word the magi had, the Holy Spirit drilled a hole into their hearts and planted the seed of faith. It’s not that the magi were super spiritual. It was that God called them.

The first people to read Matthew’s gospel must have been shocked to read about the Magi. Who would have guessed it? Magi – who were gentiles, that is, not Jews – had saving faith in the promised Messiah! They did not go to Jerusalem 3 times each year as God instructed his Old Testament people to do. They did not offer sacrifices at the temple, either. They probably had bacon for breakfast! (Remember that Jews were not allowed to eat pork.) They did not grow up learning Bible stories. Jews and Gentiles did not get along. There is **NO WAY** anyone would have guessed that the magi would be saved. But God used a star shining in a dark sky to call them. That’s the power of grace. Amazing.

Although Mary and Joseph were now living in a house instead of a stable, they were still pretty poor. No fancy clothes. Their house was probably very simple with hardly any decorations. Joseph was a manual laborer. Bethlehem was nothing to brag about. Nothing extravagant at all. And yet, in that simple setting, the magi found their Savior. Matthew says that the magi (:11) **“worshipped”** Jesus. That’s a very special word that means to put your forehead to the floor and acknowledge that the one in front of you is God – far greater than you. The magi did not think that Jesus was going to be an earthly ruler or a foreign diplomat. They recognized him as true God in the flesh. We don’t know how many details they knew about what Jesus would suffer. Did they read Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 which described his crucifixion? How much did Mary and Joseph know and how much did they share? Somehow, the magi knew that Jesus was the one who would take away their sin and give them eternal life in heaven. It’s nothing we would have guessed, but God called them and they were saved. Amazing.

The Lord used a star to shine his glory in the darkness for the magi. Instead of a star, the Lord now shines his glory in this dark, sinful world behind the simple voice of an insecure preacher, some water splashed on a head, some bread and wine eaten and drunk. We call those things the “Means of Grace” – the gospel (good news of salvation) that comes to us through the Word and Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The same Jesus who accepted the worship of the magi is right here in this room with us, pleased to hear your prayers and praises. Behind these simple forms of Word and Sacrament and in a small the church at the edge of a small city is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that people from all nations would worship the Lord. And that, “The glory of the Lord is here!” God, himself, is present. Doesn’t that just put a shiver down your spine and make you sit up taller? Doesn’t

that make your heart beat faster with excitement? This little chapel is the doorway to heaven! Here, we are reminded again and again so we never ever forget it or doubt it that your sins are completely forgiven through Jesus' death on the cross. Here, we are reminded again and again so we never ever forget it or doubt it that life on this earth is just a waiting room for the glory of a perfect body in paradise! Amazing.

Who would have guessed that the magi would be believers? And who would have guessed that you and I would also be believers in the same Jesus? We were born and grew up even further from Bethlehem than the magi did. We have not offered God any gifts or sacrifices that can impress him. We came into this world as unbelievers, enemies of God. And yet, through centuries of careful planning, God made sure that the light of salvation shined for you in the darkness of this sinful world. God was the one who did all the work. Through the means of grace he converted you. You have been called by God. He made you a believer. He saved you. Amazing!

Motivated by God

Of course, the magi were excited. Matthew tells us in verse 10 that when they saw the star leading them to Bethlehem, they were overjoyed, which is an understatement. A more literal translation would be, "They were exceedingly excited with a great joy." It wasn't just that they were nearing the end of a long journey. They were excited to see their Savior. Think of the sacrifices they made. They left behind their busy jobs, their families, their home in order to see Jesus. It cost them a lot of time and money. Jesus' love for them motivated them to show love to him. They presented Jesus with (:11), **"gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh."** Gold, of course, is precious metal. Frankincense was burned, especially in religious ceremonies. Myrrh was a very rare perfume. All of these gifts were exceptional. The magi gave Jesus the best they could. Amazing.

We also are motivated by God's saving love for us. We also are thrilled to come to worship. Spending time with God's Word and God's people is the highlight of our week. If we don't get excited for worship, then that's an indication that we are more focused on the things of this world than the things of God. Maybe we need to analyze our hearts and recalibrate things spiritually. That will be a constant struggle because the devil and our own sinful nature is constantly mixing up our priorities. The magi also planned their gift giving, just like you plan your gift giving at Christmas time. They did not just show up in Bethlehem, reach into their pockets and say, "Here Jesus, I found a little bit of gold and a few crumbs of frankincense and myrrh."

Now that we have an offering box in the church entryway, without trying to be nosy, I see people give their offerings. I see many quickly place their

sealed offering envelope in the box. I also see many who shove their hand into their pocket to pull out a few dollar bills that they have left over as if they did not think of their offering until they showed up at church. I don't pretend to judge people's hearts, but as the giving guidelines on the back of the bulletin point out, God is not impressed with leftovers. The Apostle Paul encouraged us to "set aside a sum of money." Our offerings are to be planned and prepared. They are gifts to God just like we give gifts to our loved ones at Christmas. The Lord, of course, is especially interested in the attitude of the heart which gives the gift. The story of the magi gives us an opportunity to reflect on our giving. Are we honoring the Lord with our gifts? Is our offering an accurate expression of the love and faith in our hearts? I can not answer that. Only you can. The magi gave the best they could because they were motivated by God. May the Lord also motivate us to give him generous and joyful gifts.

If you asked your friends or relatives to describe you with one adjective, what word do you think they would say? Cheerful? Kind? Grumpy? Extrovert? Introvert? Selfish? Hurting? Struggling? Lonely? Etc.? Do you think anyone would describe you as "amazing"? Probably not. None of us are considered to be rich and famous in our society. None of us have any special ability that will get us on America's Got Talent. And yet, when God looks at you, it's like a groom seeing his bride for the first time on their wedding day. Wow! God gave you the perfect, beautiful bridal gown of righteousness when you were baptized. He committed himself to you, promising to do anything for you, including laying down his life so that you could live. God looks at you as if you were a bride wearing a pure white dress, with a lace overlay that had pure gold thread woven through it. He looks at you and says, "Amazing!" You would answer, "But you gave me this dress." He would smile and say, "I know. And I'm glad I did. I have loved you with an everlasting love and I want to spend eternity with you."

The magi were amazing because God was amazing to them. You, also, are amazing because God is amazing to you. He called you to be his own, to live a holy life like him following the 10 Commandments, to live with him forever. When you get home, I want you to look in the mirror and say, "You are amazing." For as little as we know about the magi, we know that they were believers and that they are now in heaven. Just like them, you are believers headed to heaven. Because of God's love, you are amazing. Amen.