

MONDAY, 12/30

Read Matthew 2:1-2

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Of all the characters in the story of Jesus' birth story, the Magi are the most mysterious. We're told they were from the Persian Empire. They used philosophy, natural science, religion, and astrology as a means to interpret truth. Using what little information they had at their disposal, these men from a far-away land knew God is doing something significant. How did these men from the East see that God was doing something wonderful while so many others missed it?

The short answer is that they were paying attention. They would've been familiar with Israel's anticipated Savior since the time when God's people were exiled in Babylon, a land in which the Persians conquered and settled. Hope for someone to rescue them was prominent when they were in exile. The Magi knew this, so they paid attention. They watched for the signs. When an astrological phenomenon appeared in the distance, they knew that God was breaking into the natural order of the world. They set off on a journey to see for themselves what God was up to.

God's people, on the other hand, were largely oblivious to what He was doing. Many in Israel, once they were free to come back home after being in exile, stopped looking for their savior. As a result, when His star appeared in the sky directly over their heads, they didn't even see it.

I wonder if there are times when we're oblivious to something God is doing in our lives. Maybe God is moving in a specific way, and yet we're too distracted to notice. Perhaps today we need to stop and look for signs of God's activity in our lives. I promise God is moving in your life right now. Do you see Him?

Sending prayer:

"God, open my eyes to the ways You are moving in my life. Amen."

TUESDAY, 12/31

Read Matthew 2:3

³ *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.*

Herod was king of Judea. He is an example of the best and the worst in us. On one hand, he was a great builder who was capable of generosity toward his people. One time during a famine, he melted his own gold plates to provide food for his people. Just a few years later, however, he would have his wife and mother-in-law executed because of their popularity among the people, fearing they might turn the people against him.

Herod was a dangerous combination of power and paranoia. While he enjoyed his power as king, he soon began to suspect everyone around him of trying to take his throne. In addition to his mother and mother-in-law, Herod also had three of his sons killed. His position and power as king became something for him to protect at all costs, even the lives of his own children.

While this might be an extreme example, Herod stands as a symbol of our desire to protect what is ours. We fight to preserve our money, our right to make our own decisions, and our idea of how church has to be done. While this is something we do, it will, at some point, come into conflict with what God is calling us to do. There will be a point when our will and God's will collide.

The other King of the Jews presents us with a different way. While Herod's instinct was to kill to preserve his right to himself, Jesus calls us to die to ourselves. Jesus says that life isn't given to us by fighting stubbornly for it. He says we will experience the fullness of life only when we place ourselves in His hands. That means giving up our right to ourselves and what we think is best. This is the very essence of faith. It's actively trusting that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Sending prayer:

"Jesus, I want more than anything for You to live through me. Amen."

WEDNESDAY, 1/1

Read Matthew 2:4-5

⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

While the exact route the Magi would've taken from Babylon to Bethlehem is unknown to us, it's likely that the journey was around 800 miles. Depending on the size of the group, it would've taken them anywhere from one to three months to complete the journey.

It's hard for us to imagine what it would take to travel such a distance. Of course, today such a journey would be taken on a plane or extended road trip, but even a three-hour flight or three-day drive tends to leave us fatigued. They had to pack up everything they needed for their journey and push through bad weather that shifted with the changing seasons. They had to travel over challenging new terrain. Such a journey would be considered arduous at best, yet the Magi were willing to make the trip just to welcome this new King into the world.

I wonder how far you would go for Jesus. Would you have been willing to pack up your things and brave the unknown in hope that you might find Him, or would the unknown elements of the journey cause you to stay home instead? I wonder which would win you over--the comforts of home or the payout of discovering a treasure after venturing into your discomfort?

So often, we settle to stay inside our comfort zone. We like to stay with what we know, with what is familiar to us. There are certainly benefits to our comfort zone, but refusing to move beyond it can cost us as well, especially in our spiritual life. Choosing to stay within the walls of your comfort zone is a sure-fire recipe for complacency with your faith. The comfort zone doesn't allow room for God to do something new, as anything new is unfamiliar.

As a result, we are unlikely to see any spiritual breakthrough. Spiritual revival will come only when we venture beyond our comfort zone to where God is moving. This is what the Magi did. They went out in pursuit of Jesus. This journey took them well past anything that was known to them. Their breakthrough was that they got to worship at the feet of Jesus.

Sending prayer:

"Lord, what a privilege it is to worship at Your feet. Give me courage to follow You. Amen."

THURSDAY, 1/2

Read Matthew 2:6

⁶"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

After Herod summoned the chief priests and teachers of the law to inquire about the whereabouts of the Messiah's birth, they pointed him to Bethlehem. They shared the prophecy from the book of Micah. The verses are pleasant and inspiring. God is doing a great thing here in Bethlehem, but the chapters that precede this prophecy are hard. God is doing something indeed; He is judging the nations that have turned against Him and against the vulnerable. The purpose of this judgment is to bring about renewal so that these nations can reclaim their identity as God's people.

As Micah's words bring uncertainty to their future, God's people begin to wonder what will become of them when their enemy invades their land. What will they hold on to when everything goes wrong? The answer to that lies in God's provision for His people. Although judgment is on the horizon, God is still with His people. His provision comes in the form of a Shepherd, one who will care for God's people as the war rages on all around them.

In a season of fear and pain, it is God's Shepherd who will be the source of peace for the people. Verse 5, which directly follows the passage referred to in Matthew, says, "And He will be our peace." Their peace will come from One who rules with grace, justice, and righteousness. He will see His people through the storm. It's easy to see how these words pointed to Jesus for He is the One who steadies us in our own storms. He is the Prince of Peace, the very One who gives the gift of peace to us.

Sending prayer:

"Jesus, continue to be my Prince of Peace as the storms of life rage around me. Amen."

FRIDAY, 1/3

Read Matthew 2:7-8

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

All he could do was stare at the unusual star shining above. King Herod knew he had not seen it before. As his people began to talk about its significance, he became worried that their curiosity would lead them to pursue a new king--the one they had heard about in the prophecies, the one they had dreamed about, the one they thought would come and make all things better. For there to be a new star, something big must be about to happen. Why else would the heavens change?

Herod had to get ahead of what could be a threat to his reign, especially after the three magi from the East came asking about where the new King of the Jews had been born. Herod had to know about the connection to this star and the birth of a new king. He called upon his chief priests and scribes to explain when and why the star had appeared. Based on the prophecies, if the worst were confirmed, it would mean the birth of a new king in Bethlehem. He sent the astrologers to follow the star to its final destination. An anxious king put all of his hope into these "wise men", knowing that keeping his throne might depend on what—or whom—they discover.

It is possible that these men knew, even before the king asked them, exactly what the star meant. They may have known what they would find when they followed it. Even without the king's request, they had scientific reasons to pursue the nature of the star. They would leave the king's court believing the same thing they did when they had arrived. Something unexplained has happened. To be able to see a change like this in the heavens is extraordinarily rare. What is the nature of the star shining brighter than all others?

Sending Prayer:

"God, thank you for revealing Your Extraordinary Light to guide us in a star. Amen."

SATURDAY, 1/4

Read Matthew 2:9-10

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

As they pack things for the journey, the "wise men" begin to watch the skies for the star with baited breath, knowing that something extraordinary was about to be discovered. It was several hours into the blackened night that the star appeared before them. To these wise men, the star seemed to continuously move until it stopped right over the barn where the Christ child had been born.

I've lived in Texas all my life and even tried to follow a star or two on my bicycle. They did not budge. They stayed ever still exactly as I had mapped them in my mind before I left the house. I've driven for hours to get to Mexico from my home, and I never saw the change in position of the stars. Now maybe my calculations were off; after all, I was a teenager without instruments of measurement at the time. And maybe the stars are so far away that I couldn't possibly get under them. Or maybe the wise men had to walk so far to see the Christ child that the map of stars changed positions. Perhaps it's a bit of all three.

It is possible that they were not following an ordinary star at all but following God who used a star to guide them to the child. Think about it. God reveals Himself in infinite ways. God knew the astrologers/wise men would follow a star. God knew that they would investigate enough that if they found the prophesied King, they would never do anything that would harm Him. God also knew that their hearts were pure and that they would be transformed for having encountered what would indeed be a new king--the Christ child.

Sometimes in searching for God, we can find Him in the smallest, most insignificant of places, including a feeding trough in a barn. Let us be challenged to find sacred meaning in the smallest of things in our lives. You never know when or how God will reveal Himself.

Sending Prayer:

"Lord, allow our hearts to be open to receive You, even in the most insignificant places. Amen."

SUNDAY, 1/5

Read Matthew 2:11-12

¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

And there they were, positioned under the brightest star. They were in a barn with all the animals. The Baby sleeps in His mother's arms, her husband nearby. This was far beyond what the wise men had expected. His surroundings did not reflect the Child's proper title as king. His parents were young and inexperienced in the world. Neither of them seems to be surprised by the nature of their Child, both fully human and fully divine. It was unlike anything that the astrologers had ever seen before.

They knew they were in the right place. After all, the star had led them here. They instantly knew who the Child was. Their immediate response was to worship Him. The irony of this circumstance is overwhelming and not lost on the wise men. They saw a baby who was born to young, unassuming, poor parents. The birthplace was in a barn surrounded by the sights and smells of the animals. His poverty does not match the riches of royalty He so deserves.

The wise men, wealthy and educated, bowed before a Child who could not speak truth yet. They knew deep down inside that this extraordinary Child would one day change the world. The irony of His birth, God's presence with the Baby, as well as the prophecies foretold convinced them that this Infant was the real thing, the king that they had sought.

The gifts given were expensive. Praise given was true to the hearts of these wise men. They knew that the King had come. To protect what they now know, the wise men made sure to take a different route home in order to avoid capture by Herod.

Sending prayer:

"Lord, slow us down enough to know Your presence in ways we don't expect, especially during this Christmas season. Amen."