

What Do You Bring?

Matthew 2:1-12

Archibald Wallace

They came bearing gifts. They came to worship. They were looking for a new king. We sing their story in the 1857 Hymn, "We Three Kings Of Orient Are." We love the song and it helps us put a bow on the package called Christmas, so we can tidy it up and put it away for another year. But, what really happened in this story, and why is it so early in Matthew, and what is it we are supposed to learn from it after we sing of the joy of the occasion. Before we try to answer all those questions, let's first listen to Matthew, as he writes what God has revealed to him.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

Now, let's see what we can do with the questions!

1. Did they get there Christmas night? No. It would have been impossible because of the distance apart they were when they first noticed the star. The trip by road today is about 1200 miles, and even if they had used horses then, it still would have taken weeks. By the way, who said they came on camels? The Bible doesn't say it. Maybe horses! Maybe they walked! Horses, Camels, Donkeys and walking were all used back then.
2. How many Magi came? Don't know! The Bible doesn't say three, but we sing it. And, the Bible doesn't give their names. Origen, a Christian Bishop in 250 AD, gave them names. It's more likely a bunch of folks came, not just three, as they would need attendants and security for such a long trip. How about the next question!
3. Were they kings? Bible doesn't say they were! Bible says they were Magi—learned ones. King's advisers, readers, thinkers, intellectuals.
4. Why did they go to King Herod first if they had a star to guide them? There are many possible explanations here—remember—a star is not a street address thing—it's a general spot, a direction. Besides, Jerusalem and Bethlehem are only 6 miles apart, a star over one would look close 1200 miles away. How far is 6 miles really? About the same distance as walking 18 holes of a golf course. Perhaps a better explanation of why they went to King Herod first has two possibilities:
 - one—if a new king is being born, why not go to the sitting king—it might be in his house and he might know about it, or,
 - second—political protocol would suggest these foreign dignitaries went to the head of the foreign state they had entered.

Many have argued that with these inconsistencies mean the story is just that—a story—didn't happen. One wag even said she didn't believe the story because it had men stopping and asking directions. She added, "whoever heard of that?"

But, for Matthew, the story was true and he included it in his Gospel for multiple reasons. It's those reasons I want us to consider as we try to learn, with the Holy Spirit's help, what this passage says to them then and what it is still saying to us today.

First, let's start with Matthew himself. He wrote his gospel for Jewish consumption. It was meant to be read and studied by Jewish folk who knew their culture and their Bible.

Matthew wrote to confirm that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises from God recorded in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament) and to show to any Jew who would look at it seriously enough, that this Jesus was in fact the promised one, the Messiah, the redeemer, the Servant. Repeatedly, Matthew reported on instances in Jesus' life and then showed where they were referenced or promised in the Old Testament.

I submit that Matthew's main point was to say that the coming of Christ was long predicted and was now being fulfilled. The Magi were advisers, the intellectuals of their region.. They studied the writings of the world, they watched the heavens, they were astronomers and astrologers, they knew the world and they kept up with it daily. But, even better, one of their predecessors, a chief Magi, had even written a prophecy about the one who was coming, this Messiah, in which he quoted God's angel Gabriel, when Gabriel said:

Seventy sevens are decreed for your people and your holy city
to finish its transgression,
to put an end to its sin,
to atone for its wickedness,
after which I will bring in everlasting righteousness,
after which I will seal up visions and prophecy, as they will no longer be
needed.
And after which I will anoint the most Holy Place.

Know and understand this. From the time the words go
out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler comes,
there will be seven sevens and sixty two sevens.

This prophecy comes from Daniel 9:24-25. It was written by Daniel in 530 BC for his people still in Babylonian captivity. The prophecy describes two events that are to come—the words about “the time the word goes out to rebuild Jerusalem refers to a decree by Artaxerxes in 458 BC. Artaxerxes was the Persian grandson of Cyrus, and while the Jews had been sent home by Cyrus to rebuild the Temple, the prophecy to rebuild Jerusalem came later. The sevens of the seventy sevens and the 62 and 7 sevens refer to years – a week equaling a year. Time wise—the prophecy gave the date an event would occur after the decree was given to rebuild Jerusalem. The prophecy said that 483 years after the decree to rebuild Jerusalem was given, the Anointed One would come. It's a matter of math to see that Daniel said Jesus was coming in 25-26 AD. Oops! Did he miss? Wasn't Jesus 33 when he was killed? Yes, butremember that Herod died in 6 to 4 BC, so the counting of AD is off by that same time.

The second point Daniel made was not just the date, but the who –Daniel says at the time predicted a special one is coming. These wise men –these Magi, were among the followers of Daniel. They knew of his prophecy and they were looking for what was to happen in the 4 to 6 BC timeframe when Herod ruled and before his death in 4 BC. How did they know? Remember --Daniel was made head of the Magi in Daniel 2 for his ability to translate the dreams of the King, and he remained Head of the Magi through two more Kings. The Magi knew from history how accurate Daniel had been in interpreting and prophesying other events. So, they believed and they studied and and they watched and they waited and they were ready.

So, for Matthew, the birth of Jesus was something long predicted and specifically known, and by sharing what the Magi did, he was providing witnesses to the truth of the promise. .

But there is more Matthew wants us to see---there is a part that applied then and a part that applies now. It is the deeper, inner meaning of the story. Think about what we have read, think about what it says:

The Magi lived ready; they knew from the prophecy that Christ was coming and they knew from the star—God’s special light that Christ had in fact come. They knew and they lived in hope of that day.

They knew Christ had come and they came looking for the Special One who had come; they were ready for Him when he came into their lives. Should I stop here and preach? Or do you get it for yourselves? But look what they did when they saw the star—saw the light--they got up and acted—they came. They set a standard for the eons—it’s one thing to know about God, but what Christ calls us to do is to get up and respond, to act, to do.

Here’s another thing: they took a big risk—travelling 1200 miles in uncertain times, They could have been attacked or robbed; they could have been imprisoned by some petty governmental official; Herod could have thrown them out of his Kingdom. So many things could have happened to them, but they left home and followed God’s guiding light—the star, even though it was risky. Following Christ is risky; many have faced dangers and many have died. But this text says take the risk, get up and do; it’s what we’re supposed to do.

Oh, here’s another point: They came to worship. They knew who Jesus was and is. They knew to come to him, no matter what, and they came to worship. After all, he was and is the king of Kings, Lord of Lords, the only one worthy enough to take the scroll with all of God’s plan in it and give it meaning and share it with us. They knew, and they call us to know, and if we do, if we really know, then we too are to worship.

And, they brought gifts. Gifts suitable for a king—gold and spices used by kings! They came bearing gifts to compliment their worship, gifts from the abundance God had given them.

One last thing – they were Gentiles, non Jews, and they came and they were welcomed. The message for any reading Matthew was that Christ came for all the world, not jus a faction, not just a tribe, not just a place. God came for all of us, and that means me, and it means you.

So, the bottom line is this—the Magi lived ready. They were ready to meet God, on God’s terms, wherever God was, and when they could, they fell down worshipping, and committing themselves and their wealth to God. They came and they brought.

So, what about us as we start another year? Are living in Magi hope? Do we believe Christ has come and is coming again? Don’t say yes too quickly! Because if you yes, you have to say yes to living expectantly, to living like these Magi did:

1. Always on the alert.

Looking for Jesus, and when we hear of him or see him, we go then, even if there is risk.

2. Ready to worship.

To admit we are not the ultimate reasons for existence, ready to yield to him and do what he asks.

3. Ready to proclaim

Christ is the ruler of our lives, and matters so much to us, we cannot help but

- tell others that he is the long promised Jesus, the Son of the living God,
4. Ready to give of ourselves and our abundance to Him.
They brought their best, their wealth, not their leftovers,
and they brought themselves.

It's a new year; it's a time to renew; it's a time to start over. Jesus has come and his star is in the sky. Are you looking for it or have you put it back in the box for another year? ? Are you ready to come to Him? Are you willing to worship Him greatly, costly? And finally, Are you willing to bring yourself and put your life at his feet? The Magi did!

There is a prophecy in Numbers 24:17 of this Coming One, that the Magi probably also knew. It reads:

4th Prophecy of Balaam –about 1500 BC

I see him, but not now

I behold Him, but not now.

A star will come out of Jacob.

A scepter will rise out of Israel.

While this prophecy was probably first fulfilled in David, it set the belief of how the mightier one who was to come would be known – by his star.

The Wise Men were witnesses to this prophecy: Christ has come and he is coming again. Let us live ready and knowing> the magi showed us how.

Let us now sing their song and consider the truth of what these wise men are really saying:.

Matthew 2 :1-12

- 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to him and asked,
- 2 "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose, and we have come to worship him.
- 3 When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.
- 4 When 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.
- 6 For 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."
- 7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
- 8 He 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."
- 9 After 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.
- 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
- 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Micah 2:2-5a

- 2 But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, although you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.
- 3 Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son and the
rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.
- 4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of
the Lord his God
- 5 And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.