

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 60:1-6
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 2:1-12
January 2, 2022

“Why Did the Magi Come?”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Given what’s going on in the world right now if Jesus were born today the Wise Men wouldn’t have been able to get there because of a travel ban, the shepherds probably would be quarantined and everyone in the household where Jesus was born would be scrambling to find rapid tests.

We sing “We Three Kings” but the magi were not kings. We call them “Wise Men” but that’s not really an official title either. Magi were members of a priestly caste from Persia. Today Persia is known as Iran. And since tourism to Israel is currently banned due to Covid, no they would not be allowed in today. Given all the history that has since transpired in the Middle East, however, it is fascinating that Iranians came to worship Jesus the new king.

The status of the magi varied depending upon who the individual magi were. Some were advisors to kings. They were highly respected astrologers and scientists. They traveled from realm to realm giving advice and counsel to rulers. But magi is where we get the word “magician” and “magic” from. The fictional Merlin fits the bill. And of course, there were also frauds and snake oil salesmen in the bunch. Think of the wizard in the Wizard of Oz. In truth we know absolutely nothing about these magi. We don’t even know that there were three of them. The western tradition says three because there were three gifts, but the eastern tradition says there were twelve magi. The gifts that they brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh, were items that magi would have possessed as part of their tradecraft.

The magi from the east came during the reign of Herod the Great. They had to have known about Herod the Great. These were not stupid men. They asked about where to find Jesus not from Herod but from others in Jerusalem. Herod just got wind of it, because like any paranoid dictator he had spies everywhere. In his younger days, from a purely pragmatic and political viewpoint, Herod was a great king. He kept the peace and built the Temple. He built an incredible number of public buildings, cities, palaces and ports. He carefully balanced the needs of Rome and the passions of the Jewish public. But Herod was chronically insecure and paranoid. He knew that the Jews did not really accept him because his father was an Edomite who converted to Judaism and his mother a Nabatean, from what is now southwest Jordan. Herod was therefore the son of a Jewish convert and an Arab woman. He gained his political power by befriending Marc Antony and Julius Caesar. It was the Roman senate who later made him King of Judaea and gave him an army to make it happen. It was his ongoing relationship with the Emperor

Augustus that solidified his power. Herod was a Jewish King who ruled at the behest of Rome. As he aged, he became mentally unstable and increasingly cruel, murdering his wife, mother-in-law and three of his sons. When he knew he was dying he had a group of elite citizens in Jerusalem arrested and thrown in the hippodrome, instructing his sister Salome to have them killed at the moment of his death so that at least some tears would be shed. Mercifully, Salome disobeyed this order and let everyone go as soon as Herod was safely dead.

The magi could not have been ignorant of the political realities. They made their living paying attention to such things, so they were probably not thrilled to find themselves called to the palace, and they would have had to have been incredibly naïve to believe Herod when he said he wanted to worship Jesus. They had made a very long journey to get to Jerusalem, probably traveling the Silk Road and the Royal Road west and then the King's Highway south. These trade routes were well established and they brought more than goods. They brought ideas and news. Magi were Zoroastrian, but they would have had access to the Hebrew scriptures. They would have studied all manner of sacred books and known about the messianic prophecies. And Persian magi would have had close contact with Jews for another reason. A large community of Jews lived in Iran, having stayed there after being taken captive 500 years earlier under the Babylonian empire. In fact, Iran contained one of the largest populations of Jews living outside of Israel. Jewish tradition has two Talmuds as religious guides—the Palestinian and the Babylonian, and it is the Babylonian or Persian Talmud that is both larger and more authoritative. The appearance of a strange new bright star in the west must have caused a lot of speculation among the Jewish community there. They looked to the prophet Balaam, from the book of Numbers who proclaimed, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. "There shall come forth a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." (Num. 24:17).

We don't know why these particular magi responded by making such a huge personal commitment. Depending on where they came from in Iran the journey to Jerusalem could have taken a year or longer. Danger was involved. And it would have been expensive too because they would have had to finance a caravan for protection. The trade routes were well travelled but that didn't stop bandits. And apparently not everyone saw this star. There was a divine element to this revelation. Many attempts have been made to identify the star with various natural astronomical events, but this star moved, led and stayed still.

Just as the magi came from the east, so the sun rises from the east. Isaiah says, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." It is this passage among others that led many to identify the Magi as kings. But the focus here is really on those from other nations being drawn to worship this new king and messiah. Those who were once outside have now been invited in. Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem. The upper-class Jewish members

of the Sanhedrin could have come themselves to see. But they did not. To pay attention to an outsider—a magi no less—was anathema. They already had everything all figured out. No messiah was needed or wanted. But the Iranian magi came. And the last words found in Matthew’s gospel are from the risen Christ. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28: 19-20)

This is radical. We don’t realize how radical it is because we are used to a form of religion that does not depend on ethnicity. But Herod was rejected by many Jews because his parents were not ethnically Jewish. And there was nothing he could do about it. Practicing Judaism was not enough for these people. Only blood mattered. But for us it is faith that matters. Who we were born is irrelevant to our faith in Christ and our belonging in the family of God. We belong because we are in Christ. In calling the magi to witness the birth of Christ God proclaimed from the beginning that this was a savior for all. Those who were outsiders would be outsiders no longer.

The late Desmond Tutu was not a magi, but he certainly was a wise man. When asked if he thought God was upset because Gandhi was not a Christian he responded, “God is not a Christian!” God is not a Christian because God’s heart is open to all peoples, and God’s love reaches out to the entire world. Amen

Isaiah 60:1-6

60 “Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
5 Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
6 Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,

bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-12

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.”

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 “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.”

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.