

Dancing With the Star

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN
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Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

We express our appreciation to the children for their delightful musical. They have encouraged us to follow the star and that is exactly what we are going to do now. So please turn in your Bible to Matthew chapter 2 and take out your message outline and your dancing shoes as we consider the contemporary subject of **DANCING WITH THE STAR**.

First let's **FOLLOW THE IDENTITY OF THE MAGI**.

Who are these guys?

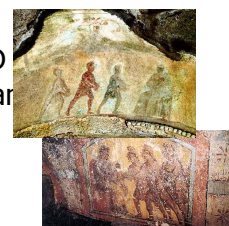
The term Magi is usually translated wise men, astrologers or magicians. Most of the evidence points to them coming from Mesopotamia or Persia. It is possible they came from Iraq, a country sadly lacking in wise men today.



The Magi were an old and powerful priestly caste found among the Medes and Persians.

These priest sages were extremely well educated for their day. They were specialists in medicine, religion, astronomy, astrology, divination and magic.

Christian art from the second century catacombs in Rome dresses them in Persian garments. The reason invading Persians spared the Church of the Nativity in 614 AD was that they saw a golden mosaic over the doorway depicting a wise man in Persian headdress.



The important thing for us to understand is that the Magi were foreigners. They were not Jews. Matthew is making a vital theological point that people came from the far corners of the earth to worship this new King.

The prophets had foretold that citizens from other lands would come and acknowledge the Messiah as ruler of the world.

Isaiah declared, **"Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:3)**

We don't know how many Magi there were.

The Greek Orthodox Church claims to know all about them even down to the names of their camels. They say there were three wise men called Melchior, Belthasar and Caspar.

Legend tells us that their ages were 20, 40, and 60 and their skin colors were white, yellow and black.

Supposedly Thomas, the Apostle to India, found and baptized the Magi in the Christian faith ordaining them as priests.

Later they suffered martyrdom and their relics were buried in Constantinople and then transferred to Cologne in Germany during the 12th century where they are said to rest today.

But in reality we don't know whether there were two or two hundred wise men. All we do know is what Matthew tells us. They were from the East and were called Magi.

The point is that Jesus is not just for a few people.

He is for the world. And if the Magi could come to the Christ then so can we.

Second let's **FOLLOW THE PURPOSE OF THE MAGI.**

What is the reason for their long journey?

We don't have to guess because the wise men tell King Herod,

"We have come to worship him." (v 2)

Now what exactly do they mean by that?

They certainly were not thinking of coming to a worship service like this one.

By worship they meant they wanted to know this king.

They wanted to honor this king.

They wanted to give something of themselves to this king.

There was a hunger in their heart for something more.

They couldn't find it in their own country and so they left it.

They couldn't find in the short term so they set off for two years.

They covered a vast distance simply to worship.

We are struck by their resolve. Their determination is incredible. They press on to worship despite enormous difficulties.



The most intriguing part of their search takes place in Jerusalem. Here they enter the domain of Herod who was the puppet king of the Roman invaders.

They demanded to know where the true king is.

This was boldness that bordered on asking for trouble.

When Herod got word of their request he was desperately worried and Matthew notes, not only was Herod disturbed but, **"All Jerusalem with him." (v 3)**

This is the first hint of what proves to be the major tragedy of the gospel.

The Messiah has come but instead of delight there is disturbance.

It wasn't that the Chief Priest and teachers of the law had neglected to master the pertinent data.

When the question was put to them about where the Messiah was to be born they immediately gave the correct reply,

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

They knew the king would be born in Bethlehem.

Now Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem on an easy road with no rivers or mountains in between.

The Magi have already come maybe a thousand miles.

But once they had the information they are off and running.

After all the King of the Jews is only a few miles down the road.

In contrast the religious leaders who had been the stewards of scripture for 700 years since Micah had given his prophecy sat immovable. They knew the scriptures but they did not know the power of God.

Herod wasn't stupid though.

He had not gained the throne by being naïve.

He feigned an interest in the Magi's quest and then utters a colossal lie, **“Go and make a careful search for the child.**

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” (v 8)

Here we see that the difference between true and false worship is action.

Herod tarries while the wise men take off for Bethlehem.

The word Bethlehem means “house of bread.”

There slept a baby who one day announced, “I am the bread of life.” Sadly instead of partaking of that bread the leaders of Israel starved eternally. On the other hand after avoiding Jerusalem the Magi returned home perfectly filled.

Now all that is very interesting but we are not Magi and we can't go to a manger. So what does this all have to do with us?

The answer is found when we **FOLLOW THE QUESTION OF THE MAGI.**

Note what these wise men asked Herod, **“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” (v 2)**

It is interesting that Gentiles should pose this question.

Jesus was to be the glory of Israel yet in Israel there were few who showed any interest.

Throughout the streets of Jerusalem there were no inquirers.

Perhaps today you are beginning to ask this question.

“Where is the one?”

If so it is a sign that God intends to bless you.

Jesus is ignored or rejected by many yet there are a chosen number who inquire diligently and who come to receive him.

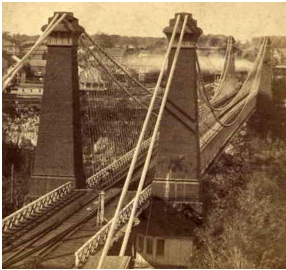
To these he gives power to become the children of God.

These wise men would not have any interest unless God had provoked it and revealed himself to them.

It is the same for us. We do not initiate a search for God.
Rather we respond to the stirrings of God's Spirit in our soul.

God had chosen these wise men to discover someone utterly glorious and they responded gladly.

These wise men didn't know much.
They only had a little belief but it was a beginning.



When the great bridge across the Niagara River was made in the 19th century the difficulty was to get the first rope across the river. It was eventually accomplished by flying a kite and allowing it to fall on the opposite bank.

The kite carried a piece of string.
The string was attached to a line.
The line was attached to a rope.

The rope was attached to a stronger rope and eventually Niagara was spanned and the bridge was finished.

So too God works by degrees.

He begins with us being a little interested in spiritual things.

This leads to greater spiritual hunger and then craving, until at last our soul demands to be satisfied.

Be thankful for any desire, however faint, that is in your heart for God. Develop it bit by bit until you can say, "I believe."

By asking a question the wise men admitted their ignorance. They needed help and they knew it.

A wise man knows when they are in need of assistance.

If God has burdened you with an inquiry, find the answer.

Talk to one of our pastors.

If we don't know the answer we will find someone who does.

It takes courage to ask questions but God provides heavenly light for those who do. Perhaps you have been attending church for some time but you have no peace in your soul.

You have no assurance that if you die today you will spend eternity in heaven. Don't face another year with that misery.

Get the matter straight today.

Ask one of our church leaders, ask a friend, but ask someone.

The scriptures say, **"Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6)**

No one will be able to say at the end of their life, "I sought Jesus but did not find him."

If Jesus is not found it is because he has not been earnestly sought for he promises, **"Seek and you will find."**
(Matthew 7:7)

Then we can **FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE OF THE MAGI.**

There was something that got them going in their search, something that God used in their life.

They tell us what it was. **"We saw his star in the east."** (v 2)



Stars were more significant back then.

Remember there was no ambient light in those days.

There were no street lights or car lights.

The night was pitch black and so the stars shone brightly.

People in the ancient world knew the night sky as well as they knew the paths around their village.

They noticed when there was a change in the heavens.

Now what was this star the Magi followed?

There are a wide range of suggestions.

Some say it was angel or a supernova or Halley's Comet.

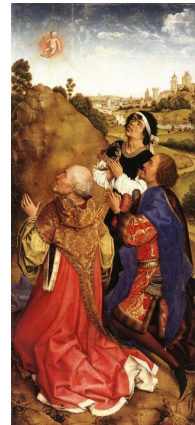
A Russian gentleman called Zaitsev says it was a spaceship from a higher civilization carrying a cosmic Jesus into the world.

One artist imagines the star as little baby Jesus, which I think is lovely but ludicrous.

Modern astronomers have pointed out that every 805 years the planets Jupiter and Saturn come into conjunction, with Mars joining the configuration of a few years later.

They have computed that for 10 months in 7 BC Jupiter and Saturn traveled very close to each other in the night sky.

Mars joined the configuration in February 6 BC, a massing of planets that must have been quite spectacular.



In ancient astrology the giant planet Jupiter was known as the King's Planet. It represented the ruler of the universe.

The ring planet Saturn was considered the defender of Palestine. Jupiter and Saturn together were called Pisces or the fishes which represented great events.

So these planets appearing together meant to people of that day that a world ruler was about to appear in Palestine at the culmination of history.

Add to this that the Jews also expected a star as a sign of the birth of the Messiah.

A prophecy in Numbers says, **"A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel."** (Numbers 24:7)

However, it is possible that this wasn't an ordinary star at all but rather a divine event. After all if God can manage the miracle of the incarnation he can certainly arrange the little matter of a light in the sky that is low enough so that a location on earth can be reckoned. For that is what happened here, **"The star went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was."** (v 9)

The point is that whatever the star is God is behind it. God is guiding foreigners to Christ to worship him. He does it by exerting global and even universal influence to get it done.

These Magi saw the star and they danced with the star.
They engaged with that star.
They could have dismissed it or ignored it but they didn't.
Step by step they followed it.

Like any good dance it was great fun for, **"When they saw the star they were overjoyed."** (v 10)
They danced with the star because they recognized this was a divine moment.

And God sends a star into everyone's life.
The star takes different forms.
For some it might be a person who makes us think and asks probing questions about God and faith.

For others it might be an experience we go through.
It could be a great joy or a great tragedy that we face and at that moment we can either run from God or run to him.
It might be a book or a movie that makes us think about eternal things and we wonder why we are here on earth and what is the purpose of it all?

For many the star moment comes from the challenge of scripture.
We are confronted with the message of the gospel.
That Jesus is the Son of God, that he died on the cross for our sin, that he rose from the dead, ascended to heaven and is coming one day to establish a new heaven and a new earth.

When these moments come we have to decide whether we going to dance with the star or walk away and let the moment pass recognizing it may never come again.

Once the Magi started dancing with their star they didn't stop until it took them into the presence of Christ.
They could have turned back in the middle of the Arabian Desert or given up when they arrived in Jerusalem but they pressed on to Bethlehem. They found the house where Mary and Joseph were living and they stepped inside so that they could see the King.

There is a real danger that we can stop short of genuine faith in Christ. We follow the star just so far.

We believe Jesus is a Savior but we never go to the next step to make sure that he is our Savior.

Finally we **FOLLOW THE REWARD OF THE MAGI.**

We see how God honored them because they did not give up.
Note what happened when they arrived at their destination.

First **they found**

"They saw the child with his mother Mary." (v 11)

They had found the Messiah and they gaze in wonder.

Here is the incarnate God.

Like the Magi let us gaze on Jesus.

He is fully God and fully man.

He is the sinner's friend.

He is willing to receive all who trust him.

One look is not enough we need to look and look and look again.

They worshiped

Matthew tells us, **"They bowed down and worshiped him." (v 11)** They fell at his feet.

That was their prize for their long journey.

Christ is the reward of worship.

He is not a means to an end. He is the end.

The purpose of true worship is not to make us feel good.

In fact, it is not directed at us or our feelings at all.

It is directed towards Christ. He is enough.

The Magi ascribed dignity to Jesus by falling down before him. Falling to the ground says to a person, "You are high and I am low. You have great worth and I am poor."

Then **they gave**

"They opened their treasures and present him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh." (v 11)

This was how you honored a king in those days.

For example, **"When the Queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon . . . she came to test him. . . arriving at Jerusalem with her very great caravan with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold and precious stones." (1 Kings 10:1-2)**

There is profound significance in these gifts of the Magi.

Gold is a royal gift. It signifies Jesus' kingship.

The incense is frankincense.

This is the milky white fragrant resin of a spiky tree that grows in Somalia and Arabia.

It is burned for its sweet smell and was used to dress wounds.

As incense it speaks of Jesus' future priesthood.



He would be the bridge builder to take us to God.

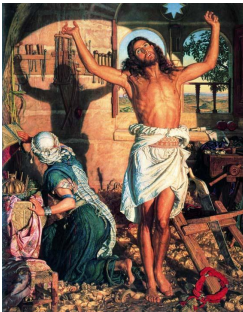
Myrrh was an aromatic orange resin that comes from Arabia and northwest Africa. It was expensive and valued for use in perfumes, anointing or medicines and embalming. It was mixed with wine to make a crude anesthetic. Years later Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh as a palliative. He was also buried with this substance.



The gift of myrrh reminds us that the babe of Bethlehem came to be the Christ of Calvary.

His death was no accident. Jesus told his disciples, "The son of man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many."

The cross cannot be separated from the cradle.
Jesus came to die.



The artist Holman Hunt captures this truth in a picture of Jesus in his father's carpenter's shop. Jesus is still only a lad. Jesus has come to the door to stretch his limbs which have grown cramped over the bench. He stands with his arms outstretched and behind him on the wall the setting sun throws the shadow of a cross.

I don't suppose the Magi understood the full significance of their gifts. But we can for we know the rest of the story.

We know that this King came to die for us. So are faced with a choice of how we should respond.

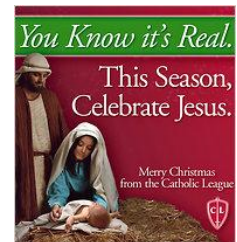
There is a battle for ideas going on right now at both ends of the Lincoln Tunnel in New York.

At one end there is a message from the American atheists showing a picture of the wise men with the slogan, "You Know it's a Myth. This season celebrate Reason!" That seems very dogmatic for a group that prides itself on its tolerance.



At the other end of the tunnel there is a response from the Catholic League declaring, "You Know it's Real. This Season Celebrate Jesus."

Today God allows us to respond just as he did at the first Christmas. We can take the side of the atheist and King Herod and deny the supernatural. We can say that this world came into being by chance. Life has no meaning and there is no message of hope at Christmas. Or we can dance with the star like the wise men. We can acknowledge that the intricacy of the heavens and the earth declare the existence of a designer. This sovereign God has made himself known to us through Christ, through whom we find purpose, joy and hope.



If that is our respond we bow down before him and make our gifts, not gold, frankincense or myrrh but our life.

We are forgiven much.

We are loved much.

So we give much.

We will gladly give our tongues to speak for him, our hands to work for him and our lives to live for him.