

“See and Seek”  
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Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

They came from the east, from where the sun rises, following a star in the darkness that would lead them into the heart of God. It was their job, these magi, these wise men. They searched the night skies for patterns and unusual events, striving to divine sacred mysteries, to seek meaning and prophesy the future.

Employed by kings and princes to find the most auspicious times for special occasions, like coronations or weddings, there was a measure of pressure for magi to get things right, and when things went wrong – famine, plague, defeat in battle – people relied on magi to give them a reason why, to bring order out of life’s chaos and hope for better days ahead.

Of course, all of that seems like nonsense to us, the stuff of astrology and horoscopes and rank superstition. The more cynical among us would call the magi fools or charlatans, but they were wise, exquisitely educated, and deeply devoted to their craft. People respected them, and so should we.

Archaeological evidence reveals that ancient astronomy was remarkably accurate, especially when you consider that their observations were made with the naked eye. They could predict, without the benefit of precise time pieces, celestial events, like lunar eclipses – events they saw as omens of a higher power.

So when the magi saw a certain star rising, somehow they knew its significance and embarked on a journey to discover what was underneath it. They seem to have had a pretty good idea what they were looking for. “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

Perhaps they'd read the prophets of Israel, who foretold the coming of a great king. Certainly, they had access to those texts.

Centuries before, Jerusalem had been conquered by their neighbors to the east, and among the goodies that were looted, sacred writings would have been very valuable to magi. It's easy to imagine that they'd studied Isaiah, perhaps were familiar with the oracle, "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

Their arrival in Jerusalem caused quite a stir. Herod, a big bully if ever there was one, jealous of power, yet like all bullies insecure deep down, was frightened and frantically summoned his own type of magi, the chief priests and scribes, demanding to know where the Messiah, this new king, would be born. On receiving the answer, he sent the visiting magi on their way to Bethlehem.

Eager to know exactly who and where this threat, this competitor to his throne was, Herod encouraged these foreign magi to come back and let him know the identity and location of this long-prophesied king. They never did, having been warned in a dream to take a different route home, and that's the last we hear of them.

Their visit with Mary and Joseph and Jesus appears to have been simple and brief. In their joy and gratitude, and to honor the arrival of this newborn king, they offered expensive and symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and then they left for their own country and vanish from the story. In fact, these twelve verses in Matthew are the only time they are mentioned in the entire New Testament.

We're left to wonder if they ever knew what sort of Messiah Jesus would be. Did they even suspect that he, revealed by a rising star, would die to rise to life again, shining with the

light of resurrection power? Maybe news did filter back to them. Legends tell of St. Thomas spreading the Gospel all the way to India. I hope so, but however it worked out for them, their presence in our story raises some challenging questions and offers some crucial insights into how we respond to the arrival of Jesus into our world and into our lives.

First of all, are we ready to see the promise fulfilled? Are we looking hard for the signals that say Christ is here? On the surface, this seems like a silly question. We just celebrated Christmas, but that was thirteen days ago. The tingle has mostly faded. Everyday life has resumed. The trees will come down soon, if they haven't already. But we need to stay focused. Otherwise, we could wind up like Herod's magi.

They completely missed it. How embarrassing it must have been when these foreign magi arrived, following a star, wanting to know, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" It seems like this is the first Herod had heard of it, which means that the chief priests and scribes hadn't told him.

Maybe they'd held the information back, but that's unlikely. Holding back from a boss like Herod was not a good idea. More likely, they were clueless. They either didn't see the star or saw it but didn't notice anything special about it. They could quote the prophets in a flash, but in this crucial situation they didn't understand what the prophecies meant.

Maybe they didn't want to see it. Maybe they were afraid to make the connection, because in the ancient world, killing the messenger was more than a metaphor. You saw how upset Herod got when the eastern magi popped their question about the new king. Suddenly, the comfy, fragile status quo was on the edge, in danger of slipping off and shattering. Enmeshed in this system, Herod's magi either did not see or saw but did not understand or understood but

preferred to deny the truth. It was safer and easier that way, and we tend to like safe and easy just as much as they did.

Sometimes, we don't look for hints about where Jesus is, because we're distracted or don't believe there's anything to see, or our intuition is keen enough to realize that seeing the star and following it and finding Jesus will probably make a mess out of our lives. He can make life as inconvenient and as troublesome as a long road trip to Bethlehem, but like the magi from the east, that's where we find true joy, in the presence of Jesus, because the change he brings transforms us, refines our vision, grants fresh perspective, and makes us wise.

The mere potential of such blessings propelled the magi to make their pilgrimage. I don't think curiosity alone could have motivated them to do what they did. They had a sense of something extraordinary happening, and they wanted to be a part of it. Pagan though they may have been, they give an awfully good example for aspiring Christians. Let's take a long walk in the dark with them, chasing a star, seeing it for what it really is, a promise fulfilled.

Second, once we see the star and seek the Savior, upon arrival at the stable, are we ready to sacrifice to Jesus? He sacrificed everything for us. It only seems fair that we'd sacrifice something for him. He came down to Earth from heaven to become human and suffer with us, and he went up on the cross to suffer for us and our salvation. A faithful response is to give generously out of gratitude, just as the magi did.

Now this is not a sly lead in to stewardship. Gold and frankincense and myrrh are nice, but it's not what Jesus is really after. The Christmas carol "In the bleak midwinter" puts it well, "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him – give my heart."

Jesus wants your heart, because once he has that, everything else follows. Once we give Jesus our hearts, we can't hold anything back from him, and if we're holding back from Jesus, it's a sign that we've not given him our hearts, at least not completely.

When we give Jesus our hearts, we can believe our dreams, as the magi did, when they were warned in their sleep to avoid Herod. Imagine how easy it would have been to disregard that dream as meaningless. Making a king mad was a bad idea, especially somebody like Herod. But these magi were wise. They saw what others ignored. They made connections others missed. They took risks others avoided. They trusted their dreams.

We've been taught to view our dreams, both sleeping and waking, as impractical and irrational, and most of them are, but far from all. Even when we've given Jesus our hearts, sometimes we don't listen or look very closely, and when that happens, God comes after us when our defenses are down while we sleep, and we dream dreams that demand our attention.

Sometimes, it clicks quickly, and we perceive the meaning of the dream. More often, it takes hard work, and it's always wise to share that process of interpretation with someone you trust. We need to resist the temptation to reject our dreams out of hand. If the magi had returned to Herod and told him where to find Jesus, things might have turned out very differently.

Like the magi, we Christians have a job to do. We need to search for the light of Jesus. Once we see it, we need chase it to find out what it means. Once we've arrived where Jesus is, we need to sacrifice our hearts to him. Then we need to trust our dreams, explore their meaning, and act to advance God's purposes. This is the path to wisdom, a pilgrimage led by a star shining in the darkness. It's time to go. Amen.