

“Enough for the Magi”
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Matthew 2:1-12

We call them kings and wise men, but they were magi, from the Greek word for magic. Probably treated like royalty because of their superior learning, the magi were, first and foremost, magicians – not in the tradition of David Copperfield, but of a much more ancient, slightly sinister order. Call them what you will: alchemists, astrologers, proto-scientists, superstitious charlatans, or a little bit of all of the above. Our modern condescension does not alter the eminence they enjoyed in their own day. They influenced the mighty and awed the masses, searching the stars for clues to the future.

We know so little of these mysterious magi, not even their names, or how many actually came to the manger. Did they come from Persia, or possibly even farther away? What did they expect to find underneath that unusual star shining in the West? What happened to them once they left the manger and went home? All Matthew tells us is that being warned in a dream, they took a different route. But did they make it there? It was an arduous, risky journey, and scripture says nothing. History is silent.

Such a mystery tantalizes our imagination and spurs speculation, but ultimately these magi matter very little. They are passing characters in a much grander tale. One wonders why Matthew even bothers to mention them or why they feature so prominently in our observance of Christmas.

They did bring gifts, and that helps validate our penchant for presents at this time of year, and Matthew, the sole gospel author to share this part of the story, obviously does so for the sake of those costly gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh: the first, the premium currency of their age,

a symbol of kingship; the second, a very costly spice of priestly sacrifice used in the Temple at Jerusalem as an offering to God; the third, a gummy cypress resin frequently used for burial preparations, a stark foreshadowing of how Jesus' mission will find fulfillment. They're odd gifts for a baby. No pacifier; no onesie; no stuffed animals or toys.

Of course, the magi almost certainly did not know what they would find under that bright western star. They likely packed up or purchased along the way the best gifts they could find; the best stuff they could afford. Matthew probably included these details, because the gifts help illustrate the kingly, priestly, and prophetic character of the baby Jesus.

I wonder if those magi were disappointed or confused by what they found; perhaps reluctant to part with those precious presents. How would we react in similar circumstances? Might we scoff and walk away if confronted with something so unexpected, a manifestation of someone great that didn't meet our definition of great?

Nevertheless, the magi knelt known, offered their precious gifts with a deep sense of joy, and then defied the local ruler, Herod. They ignored his instruction to return with more news about this strange occurrence. Would any of us show the same disregard for authority, be quite as free with our funds and reputations, as those magi who nearly escaped notice? No praise for them; no grand legacy left behind: just a brief visit and a long journey back home and twelve verses in the Gospel of Matthew. That's it.

Or did they leave a legacy after all? For we remember them still, despite their relatively minor role in a much bigger story, and we remember them, not so much for their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but for the gift we receive from these three, namely how to respond to a star and accept the unexpected from God. For these magi, there was no guarantee of safety or

success; no promise that they would ever achieve their goal or that their goal would, in the end, be found worthy of working so hard to achieve.

They just followed a star, when everybody else sat where they were, thinking it might be special, but not special enough to take the trouble to pursue it, at great inconvenience and trouble. They revered a baby in a barn with eagerness, absent shame. They defied the instructions of a dangerous ruler and went a different way, all because of a dream they received, warning them that a change of plan would be necessary.

How many of us ignore our dreams, both sleeping and waking? How many of us might feel silly to do something like what they did? How many would be too busy with the challenges and pleasures of everyday life to leave it all behind and take that trip on an intuition that something amazing was happening? How many of us would give the most precious things we could get our hands on, without more information that could confirm, preferably beyond a shadow of a doubt, the worthiness of the recipient? How many of us would defy someone like Herod, a man so vicious he had all the male infants and toddlers of Bethlehem slaughtered on the off chance that he might kill a potential competitor for his crown?

The magi did all of that, and the reward of these pagan star-watchers was merely to be in the presence of Jesus. Not to hear his wise parables or witness one of his miracles; not to be emotionally moved or intellectually gratified or spiritually inspired; not to be converted to a new way of life, or to be healed or fed or anything else. No, their only reward was just being in his holy presence, which was enough for them. Is it enough for us, or do we demand more?

I doubt they ever knew about a man named Matthew, much less imagined that he would write about them, or that his book would be read for the next two millennia by billions of people

all around the world. I can't imagine that the magi suspected for a moment that anyone, beyond Mary and Joseph and Jesus, would ever know or care about what they did or why.

They just did it. Not for recognition or a reward beyond the satisfaction of their insatiable curiosity. It's very doubtful that they hoped somehow their pilgrimage might impact their afterlife. They did it, I think, because these men of integrity spend their lives seeking meaning in the mysteries of the universe, so that they could find a little peace in an unpredictable, sometimes harsh world, and then share that wisdom with others.

What their audience with the baby Jesus meant to them, we will never know, and perhaps neither did they. But what we do walk away with is an example of these magi, who took the time and the risk and the expense – not for any guarantees or specifically defined benefit – to simply be in the presence of Jesus, which for them, seems to have been enough. Amen.