

“Led to Joy” GPPC 1-3-16
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the wise men visiting Jesus is so enveloped in the fog of legend it’s difficult for us to see the biblical narrative actually before us. And just like the sun finally came out after about a month of cloudy days around here, we pray for God’s sun to burn away the clouds of folklore so we can see what’s actually written in the Bible and hear what God might teach us as we live into the coming year.

First, the cast of characters in the story.

Matthew tells us about the visit of “wise men from the East” to Jerusalem. “Wise men” is better translated as Magi or astrologers. One of my pastor friends I admire is Michael Usey down the street at College Park Baptist Church. Michael had this Facebook post the other day. He wrote, “Wow! I just found the most incredibly accurate horoscope for 2016. Mine is spot on.” And then there was a chart of all the signs of the Zodiac. It read, “Aries: The stars and planets will not affect your life in any way. Taurus: The stars and planets will not affect your life in any

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way.” And so it went through all the Zodiac signs. What are you going to do with those smarty-pants American Baptist preachers?

The Magi of Jesus’ time are non-Jews, Gentiles. And they try to make sense of the world and even predictions about the future by observing the sun, the moon, and the stars. And we can relate to that. We Presbyterians may not believe in astrology, but we do like science and astronomy.

Gazing at the night-time skies with their twinkling stars light-years away, beyond our counting, we are liable to join the Psalmist and say to God, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?”

Exploring quantum physics and the possibility of string theory and alternate universes and chaos in the midst of order, we are awed.

Even gazing at the intricacy and wonder of the human body and especially the human brain, we are amazed and filled with wonder. So we join the Magi in hoping to gain some understanding of the world,

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maybe even make some predictions about the world by observing the creation.

But as impressive as science is, it is not enough. We will not learn all that we need to know about the world or the God who made the world simply by observing the world or even experimenting and testing hypotheses about the world. We will not know enough and our families will not know enough about God from a science text book or simply from a walk in the woods or a stroll along the shoreline on Sunday morning. Astrology was not enough in Jesus' day. And science, as useful as it is, is not enough in our day. Something more is needed.

Somehow even the Magi knew this. So they traveled from the East to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We've observed his star at its rising, and we've come to pay him homage." The Greek word for homage here means "to express in attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure, [to] (fall down and) worship, do obeisance to, prostrate oneself before, do reverence to, welcome respectfully. . . ." The Magi have observed the stars all right. But now they've come to

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Jerusalem not for celestial observations, not for practical advice on how to succeed in business, not for tips on building the perfect family, no.

They have come to worship. They have come to worship this child born king of the Jews.

And why have you and I come here today?

King Herod caught wind of their visit to find this child they wanted to worship. You may remember Herod was not actually a full-blown king. He was lower-ranking than that, a tetrarch over a region. He never reached the status of king, and that really chafed him. Of course, he was vicious enough as a tetrarch, bumping off even his own family members. Thank God he never made king.

“King” Herod heard about the Magi visitors and he heard about the child. And he was frightened. He was scared, he and all Jerusalem with him. Scared of what? Scared of what despots are always scared of. That there is an authority greater than they are. There is a judgment beyond any judgment they will render. And there is someone who will toss aside the false order they have imposed in order to bring in the righteous reign of God. Despots are afraid of that. And they should be. And sometimes

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the people under their oppression are afraid too because they fear their lives might get worse not better. The unknown is terrifying for them.

Herod heard of the visitors and the child, and he was terrified. So he brought in the religious leaders for a press conference, um, I mean a consultation. Imagine that. A secular leader trying to use religious leaders for his purposes, maybe to give public blessing to a war or to support discrimination against a people. Imagine that. Church and state may sometimes work together for the common good. But the church must never be naïve. As Martin Luther King Jr. reminded us, the church is to be “the conscience” of the nation.

Herod brought in the religious leaders. And maybe they were dazzled by the lights, the cameras, the reporters scribbling on their notepads and recording with their microphones, because they gave up the information about this long-awaited child in a heartbeat. “The Messiah? Oh, yeah he’s going to be born in Bethlehem. The one who is going to rule Israel is coming from Bethlehem. You’ll find him there.”

And let’s just guess this news did not sit well with “King” Herod. So he snuck around and called for the Magi and said, “Go and search

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diligently for the child and when you find him, send word back to me, so I can also go and worship him.”

Doesn't Herod remind you of the Grinch when he tries to steal all the Christmas presents and even the Christmas tree, and little Cindy Lou Hoo wakes up and says, “Santie Claus, why? Why are you taking our Christmas tree? Why?” And he says, “There's a light on this tree that won't light on one side. So I'm taking it home to my workshop, my dear. I'll fix it up there, then I'll bring it back here.” Right.

“Let me know when you find the child, because I want to go worship him too.” Right.

So the Magi did go and look for the child. And Matthew says they were guided by a star (like the star banners that adore our sanctuary this morning). The Magi were guided by a star not because reading the stars is the way to understand the world. No. They were guided by a star because all creation, even the stars themselves serve the holy purpose of the Messiah just born, King of the Jews, Lord of the Universe.

And when the Magi did find the child the Bible says they were overwhelmed with joy. Actually that doesn't do it justice. The Greek

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more literally has redundancy along the lines of, “They rejoiced with exceedingly, great joy.” “How great our joy,” they must have sung.

And picture the strange and wonderful scene that unfolded. These grown men knelt at the child’s feet. And the men opened their treasure chests and offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to a child who was probably two years old or younger. Imagine this child with heaps of treasure strewn all around him. And remember, in Luke’s telling, poor shepherds greeted Jesus. In Matthew’s telling, wealthy Magi greeted him. So the gospel is not only for the poor, but thank God, it is also for the powerful and wealthy. It is also for us some of the more powerful and wealthy people who have ever lived.

And finally this part of the story ended when the Magi were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod with his lies and murder in his heart. Instead, as that great theologian James Taylor sang, “They went home by another way.”

What does any of this have to do with you and me 2000 years later? Everything. Everything.

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If this child is who Matthew and the Magi and the Bible and the Church say he is (and he is) then we are invited to join the Magi and all creation in bringing the gifts of our lives to Christ. This child is who God says he is, the Messiah, the Son of God, Lord. And we are privileged to pay him homage, to worship him with all that we have and all that we are.

It will not always be easy. It will demand our commitment. It will cost us something of the treasure of our lives. It will also cost us our pride, because worship demands we acknowledge something and someone is more important than our recreation, convenience, and amusement.

And our allegiance to Christ may be dangerous. All the Herods, all those who oppose the justice, mercy, and love of Christ will not be amused. They will be frightened and enraged if we heed God's call to fight injustice and to go home another way. Are we ready?

The child born king of the Jews, Lord of the Universe has been born. In the New Year then, what treasure will we bring him in adoration? Will we bring him our worship and prayers, our generous

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giving, our careful study, and our glad service? Will we invite others to come here and to know him? Will we stand up to the Herods who would murder him and all that he stands for? What will we bring to Christ in the New Year as God leads us, leads us to joy? Amen. ©Jeff Paschal