

“Coming to Jesus”
Matthew 2:1-12

In this passage we’re confronted with a mysterious band of travelers who have fascinated people for centuries – the magi. They seem to materialize out of nowhere. Matthew gives practically no details about them – what country they came from, what system of belief they represented, or how they knew the meaning of the star they had seen. They just show up, leave their gifts, and disappear. Today I’d like to identify the magi, and show how their seeking and finding Jesus can help us celebrate the Savior’s birth in this Christmas season.

First, the magi; who are these guys? The word “magi” actually means “great (or powerful) ones.” The magi came from the East (probably Persia, in the area we know today as Iran and Iraq). They were skilled in astronomy, astrology, and the occult (sorcery, witchcraft, and divination). They were especially known for their ability to interpret dreams. We get the words “magic” and “magician” from the word magi. Magi were not kings, but they were key counselors to and administrators for kings. The word “magistrate” also comes from the word “magi.” They were so distinguished by the worldly standards of that day that their arrival in Jerusalem caused a stir: “King Herod was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him,” verse 3 tells us. This was in part because they would not have traveled alone. They probably had a large entourage and soldiers accompanying them. They were powerful men, and Herod probably perceived them as a threat, given that he was famous for his paranoia. Magi are referred to in the Old Testament, although the word magi is translated counselor or wise men. Jeremiah 39:3 refers to “Nergal-sar-ezer of Samgar” the chief magi in Nebuchadnezzar’s court. For correctly interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, Daniel was made the master of the magi (Daniel 2:48). It’s argued that through Daniel, the magi would have become familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, including the prophecies about the Messiah. Obviously, there are a number of details about this story that we just don’t know. We’ll sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are” in a few minutes, but we don’t know how many magi visited Jesus. The idea that there were three comes from the church father Tertullian, who lived more than 200 years after Jesus’ birth. And what about the star, especially as it led the magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? Also, we don’t know exactly when the magi found Jesus. From verse 11 we know that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were living in a house when they arrived. From verse 16 we can establish that Jesus was less than two years old. Besides that, we really don’t know. The fact that so little information of this kind is given shows that Matthew is not interested in how many magi there were, the length of their journey, or the star. Instead, he’s interested in the fact that Jesus came for all who are willing to seek and find Him! Here, at the very beginning of His life, foreigners, Gentiles, non-Jews came to worship Jesus, the Jewish Messiah.

While it’s more correct to call them magi, these were truly wise men, and their wisdom is helpful to us in at least three ways. First, they were wise in that they acted on what little truth they had. God had informed them of the birth of the new Jewish king, though we do not know exactly how. Despite their involvement in paganism, superstition, and the occult, the magi recognized God’s voice when He spoke, and they responded. These were men who were genuinely seeking God. Realizing they were far away from Him, they prepared a traveling caravan and made their way to the capital city of the Jews in their effort to find Him. Let me ask you: have you heard, have you responded to the truth you know about Jesus? Are you genuinely seeking God in this Christmas season?

Second, the magi were wise (men, listen closely to this one), the magi were wise in that they asked for directions. It’s argued that if the magi had been women, they would have gotten to Bethlehem in time for Jesus’ birth, because they would have asked for directions. This argument is refuted, as it’s clear the magi asked for directions once they arrived in Jerusalem! Anyway, this is a complete role reversal for the magi. In their own country they were the men with all the answers, people went to them to have their questions answered. Now they’re asking for help. There wasn’t much help to be found in Jerusalem, but they found it when the chief priests and teachers of the law opened the Scriptures and read to them Micah 5:2, “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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.” The magi were willing to ask for help, and when they received it, they acted on it.

Third, the magi were wise enough to be humbled when they found Jesus. Realize that they were grown men, they were wise and wealthy enough to invest the two years of their life to search for the Messiah, they were

important enough to get an audience with King Herod. But they were humble enough to bow the knee in worship in response to the glory of the little one before them. They were before God, and their worship was an act of submission to Him. All this to say that it is not enough to know Who Jesus is or what He has done – we fall short if we only acknowledge certain truths about Him without also giving ourselves to Him in worship, submission, and faith. Have you found Jesus? The point here is not to be entertained by this story of Jesus' birth, the point is that we might find Christ, as the wise men did, and that we might submit to Him and worship Him as King, Lord, and Savior.

Of course, this story tells us of some who didn't find Jesus. There's Herod. He was threatened by Jesus, hated Him, and tried to destroy Him. Another group who didn't find Jesus were the chief priests and teachers of the law. They had all the head knowledge about the coming Christ, but could've cared less. They had no time for God's promised Messiah, they weren't even willing to travel six miles to Bethlehem to check it out. While hatred is one reaction to Jesus, indifference is a much more common response. Indifference is typical of people who don't think they need any help, don't need a savior, they're all right just the way they are. Jesus' primary ministry was to people who knew they weren't all right "just the way they are." His primary ministry was to people who had problems and knew it. He said, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). What about you? Are you looking for help today, are you looking for God? These magi teach us that perfect theology is not required to come to the conclusion that Jesus is God's Son who came to earth for you. In His life and death and resurrection He offers you help, salvation, forgiveness, fulfillment, peace, and happiness. Listen to this precious promise God makes in Jeremiah 29:13: "You will find Me when you seek me with all your heart." You're wise like the magi if you seek and find and worship Jesus as your God, your Lord, your Savior. And what if you have found Jesus? What if you're already one who's declared, "Jesus is my Savior, my Lord, my God!" Let me ask you: what's the quality of your worship of Him? I'm not just talking about attending church. What we do here Sunday morning is an important part of worshiping your Lord, but it's not all. If worship is an act of submission to God, how is your worship life going? This is what the Apostle Paul is getting at in Romans 12:1: "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Your body, your life, the way you live each day is a spiritual act of worship. How are you doing in your life of worship? Are you praising God continually for all the blessings and benefits and comfort He showers on your life every day? Are you embracing change in your life so that you can grow more and more into the character of Jesus Christ? You know that's God's purpose for you, to become more and more like Jesus; His love, His goodness, His courage, His strength, His peace, His joy growing, becoming stronger in your life as the days go by. Are you sharing the good news of Jesus with those in your life who have yet to find Him and worship Him? Are you giving generously, extravagantly to the work of your Savior and Lord?

As you do these things in your spiritual act of worship, you'll experience something we find at the end of the story about the magi. In verse 12 we're told that they "returned to their country by another route." That's true in two senses: first, they took another route home geographically. They didn't go back to Jerusalem to make a report to Herod. Second, the magi took another route home spiritually. You see, the lives of the magi were never the same after they found and worshiped Jesus. The same can be true for each of us! As we find and submit ourselves to Jesus in worship, adoration, and praise, our lives will never be the same. Our lives will follow a different route, and that route will be a good one because it is the route that follows our Savior, our Lord, our God!