

Home by Another Way

Matthew 2:1-12

John Breon

Wise Men, Magi. We've heard of them all our lives. They are part of every Christmas pageant and cantata we've seen. Still, I want us to hear the story again and then focus on one feature of it.

Some time after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, some Magi came from the East to Jerusalem. Astrologers from Persia (which is where Iran is now) came looking for the new Jewish king. In the Bible, God consistently tells his people not to engage in astrology. But, for one special event in history, the God who rules the heavens chose to reveal himself where the pagans were looking. As the Magi studied the stars and looked into ancient writings, they discovered that something new was happening. God reaches out to everyone everywhere. Even the most pagan of pagans may respond to Jesus if they are given the opportunity. This is one motivation for the Church being in mission and sharing the gospel with everyone (Craig Keener, *Matthew*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series).

These non-Jewish scholars came looking for the king of the Jews. The king they met, Herod, probably did not impress them. The signs they had seen indicated that a new king was born. This got Herod's attention. He had come to power and protected his power by killing many other people, including several members of his family. He reacted to the news of a new king with a coldblooded attempt to remove this new rival. It's hard to believe the good news has enemies, but they are there.

Herod calls the religious scholars to explain where the Messiah was to be born. They brought out the words of the prophet Micah about Bethlehem. But none of those scholars rushed to Bethlehem to see if the new king, the Messiah, had been born. They took Jesus for granted and regarded him as just another baby. Do we too easily take Jesus for granted and ignore the wonder of who he is?

Herod sends the Magi to Bethlehem and, pretending to want to honor the new king, tells them to report back to him. They go on their way and again see the star that guided them to Judea. Nobody knows what the

star was. To give the kind of specific guidance we see here, it may have been something beyond a natural event, maybe something like the pillar of fire and cloud that guided the Israelites in the wilderness. Whatever it is, it brings them to the house where Jesus is. And they are overjoyed to see it.

They come to the house and find the child Jesus and his mother Mary. Notice they are in a house, not a barn or cave. This may be the house of some of Joseph's relatives. The stable Jesus was born in may be part of this house. And, this may be some months or even nearly two years after Jesus was born.

At any rate, the Magi bow down and worship Jesus. This shows God's revelation to all nations, to all peoples, not just the Jews. As part of their worship, the Magi offer gifts to the child Jesus. Later interpreters saw in the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh signs that Jesus was "to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Savior" (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* 33).

The last we hear about the Magi is that they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so *they went home another way*. We can see in this that Jesus—and the Magi—were being protected from Herod's murderous rage. But, there's another interesting thought here and that is that an encounter with Jesus changes the direction of our lives. When we come to Jesus, we all go home by another way. Oral Roberts was the first one I heard talk about this, years ago. I have used the idea at various times. James Taylor even wrote a song about the Magi called *Home by Another Way*.

Those magic men the Magi
Some people called them wise
Or oriental, even kings
Well anyway, those guys
They visited with Jesus
They sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme
They went home by another way

...

Steer clear of royal welcomes
Avoid a big to-do
A king who will slaughter the innocents
Will not cut a deal for you
He really, really wants those presents
He'll comb your camel's fur
Until his boys announce they've found trace amounts
Of your frankincense, gold and myrrh

Well it pleases me to be here
And to sing this song tonight
They tell me that life is a miracle
And I figure that they're right
But Herod's always out there
He's got our card on file
It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch
Old Herod likes to take a mile

Time to go home by another way
Home by another way
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
And go home by another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way

(on *Never Die Young*, 1988)

It's what happens whenever we come to Christ and acknowledge him as Lord and King. When we present our best gifts to him. We give him ourselves, we give him what is most precious to us. We honor him with all that we are and all that we have. And it changes us. That encounter leads us to go in a new direction. The coming of Jesus changes the trajectory of the world, of history, and of our lives.

As we enter this new year, let's renew our covenant with God—our commitment to follow God wherever he will lead, whatever changes following him requires.

Of course, change is hard. I imagine the Magi were surprised and puzzled at the reception they got in Jerusalem and at the attitude of Herod and his scholars. Now the Magi receive guidance through a dream that warns them and leads them in a different way than they intended. The way home they probably took was longer and more difficult than the way they had come. The journey didn't end when they found the One born "King of the Jews." It was really just the beginning. Our journey *begins* when we come to Christ and give him ourselves.

Also, the way the Magi looked at the world began to change. We have no way of knowing what became of these wise men after they left Bethlehem. I like to think they kept studying and pursuing the truth. Maybe later they heard about Jesus and his teachings and became true followers of his. If they really embraced Jesus and his ways, they could no longer rely on the stars to guide them. They would have a new leader. Madeleine L'Engle captured this change in a poem entitled "One king's epiphany":

I shall miss the stars.

Not that I shall stop looking
as they pattern their wild wills each night
across an inchoate sky, but I must see them with a different awe.
If I trace their flames' ascending and descending—
Relationships and correspondences—
then I deny what they have just revealed.
The sum of their oppositions, juxtapositions,
led me to the end of all sums:
a long journey, cold, dark and uncertain,
toward the ultimate equation.
How can I understand? If I turn back from this,
compelled to seek all answers in the stars,
then this—Who—they have led me to

is not the One they said: they will have lied.
No stars are liars!
My life on their truth!
If they had lied about this
I could never trust their power again.

But I believe they showed me the truth,
truth breathing,
truth Whom I have touched with my own hands,
worshipped with my gifts.
If I have bowed, made
obeisance to this final arithmetic,
I cannot ask the future from the stars without betraying
the One whom they have led me to.
It will be hard not to ask, just once again,
to see by mathematical forecast where he will grow,
where go, what kingdom conquer, what crown wear.
But would it not be going beyond truth...
to lose my faith in truth once, and once for all
revealed in the full dayspring of the sun?

I cannot go back to night.
O truth, O small and unexpected thing.
You have taken so much from me.
How can I bear wisdom's pain?
But I have been shown: and I have seen.

Yes. I shall miss the stars.
(*A Cry Like a Bell* 62-63)

We thought we could just come to the manger and see the baby and go on with our lives. We thought we could just drop off a gift for Jesus and then get on with whatever we wanted to do. But we find that Jesus has a strange power and attraction. We want to stay and see what he is about.

The more we stay with him and find out about him, the more involved we become in who he is and what he is doing. Before we know it, we are giving ourselves to him. We are promising to follow him wherever he takes us. We are giving things we had always held onto. We find ourselves changing in ways we never expected.

Knowing that, I invite you to come to Jesus today. Bring yourself. Bring your best gifts. Be willing to let him change you. Follow him as he leads you home—your real home—another way, another direction.