

Message for December 11, 2005
**What I learned about following
Jesus from the Magi**

Matthew 2:1-12

So now, for the last two weeks, we've been asking the question about what we can learn about following Jesus from the people we meet in the Christmas story. Two weeks ago we looked at Mary, and learned the crucial lesson of **availability**. Are you available to God? If this afternoon you got a call challenging you to get involved in some important matter that was clearly from God, what's your "default setting"? Are you primed to say *yes* to God the way Mary was, or is your natural response to say, "Hmm, I don't think so." I think maybe telemarketers have ruined it for us all! We have to say NO ten times a day, so maybe we've come to be like that Capital One commercial where all the workers are supposed to say NO to everything!

The Jesus-follower needs a YES orientation, and Mary teaches us that loud and clear. Then last week we looked at Joseph. The big lesson from Joseph's life is **flexibility**. The pregnancy of Mary was a "rude interruption" for Joseph. As a matter of fact, his whole life, until the night that God gave him a dream to see that Mary's child was a child from God, was one story of disappointment after another. But then God "showed up" and everything changed. It's easy to miss God "showing up" if we're inflexible. Joseph shows us just how much God can do when we are willing to bend to let Him in.

Now we're going to stay in Matthew and look at the Magi, the "wise men." Then next week, we'll have a grand musical worship experience of Christmas with "Because of Bethlehem." And on Christmas Day—yes, Christmas falls on

Sunday this year, we'll round things out with a look at what we can learn from the shepherds about following Jesus.

But now, let's look at these Magi. Right up front, I want to suggest three things I learned about following Jesus from them.

- In God's eyes, skeptics are always welcome
- Followers of other religions are welcome
- But eventually, you have to bow before Jesus

Let's read the Magi story all in one gulp, from Matthew 2:1-12:

1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6" `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."

7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Magi really are the wild card of the Christmas story. And the fact their story is even told in Matthew sticks out like a sore thumb. Matthew loves to tell the story of Jesus in terms of how Jesus fulfilled the hopes of the Jewish people for a Messiah. But here we have a caravan of non-Jews arriving to see the Messiah-King child.

There's a reason for this. In the gospel of Matthew, there are no less than 12 major passages that speak to the fact that Gentiles are the objects of God's love, and that the message of Jesus is for the whole world.¹ In that case, it's not surprising that we meet a group of Gentile seekers right off the bat in Matthew.

Who were these guys?

The Magi were originally a religious caste among the Babylonians and the Persians. They were experts in astrology, and basic scientific knowledge of the time. Remember, this was a time in which there wasn't a sharp line between being a scientist and being a sorcerer.

¹ Matthew 1:5-6; 2:1-12; 4:12-17; 4:23-25; 8:5-13; 8:28-34; 15:21-28; 16:13-20; 20:1-16; 21:42-44; Matthew 28:16-20.

We actually get the word “magic” from the name “Magi.”

Where did they come from? Our best guess is from what was already ancient Babylon, then part of the Parthian empire.

One thing that’s absolutely certain is that they were NOT kings. The song that we hear at Christmas time to that effect is from medieval folklore. And even the number of Magi who made the journey is a guess based on the three gifts given to the child Jesus.

We could spend a lot of time talking about the background, a Herod’s paranoia and why he distrusted anybody from Parthia, and so forth, but I want to focus on the main thing—what have I learned from the Magi about following Jesus?

The first is that

In God’s eyes, skeptics are always welcome

These guys aren’t Jews. As a matter of fact, as we’ll see in a minute, they hold beliefs that are totally incompatible with Biblical teaching.

From one standpoint, these guys are *skeptics*. They’re on the outside of faith looking in. And one big lesson of the Magi story is this: *skeptics are welcome*.

Now, if they had an award in my Junior High School for this, I would have won it: *Outstanding Skeptic, Eighth Grade, 1971*. I rejected the whole God thing. I was more than a little skeptical: I’d come to the conclusion that God was a fraud and that my Christian friends were weak-minded nitwits. I recall during that time in one class seeing a film about the communist revolution in Russia

and when they got to the part about closing the churches, putting priests in prison and turning the Cathedrals into museums, I muttered to myself, "Well, that was the best idea they ever had."

Truth is, I hated the whole God-thing. I thought Christians had as much sense as a guy who worshipped gym socks. It was all superstition to me. I knew the *truth*: we came from slime, and we're on our way to being worm-food, and that's all there is to it. All the rest are just Mary Poppins stories we make up to make us feel good.

Yeah, I was a skeptic, and a hostile one as well. But slowly the witness of a few friends, one in particular, eroded my certainty. It's a long story I've told before, but at the end, I was overwhelmed by the evidence for God. I remember the May afternoon I gave in. I didn't pray a little prayer, walk down an aisle or read the Four Spiritual Laws. I just said to God, "OK God, you win." That's it. I just caved.

Now, these Magi are skeptics too. And notice what God didn't do: He didn't "smite the skeptic." Instead, he loved the skeptic. He wooed the skeptic. He pursued the skeptic. And He won over the skeptic.

Skeptics are welcome in God's way of doing things. He's not intimidated by anybody's questions, and He's not going anywhere.

Now these Magi were skeptics not because they were like me, non-believers in anything, but because they weren't Jews and didn't share in the faith of the God revealed in the Bible.

And that leads to the second lesson I've learned from the Magi:

Followers of other religions are welcome

And they were indeed followers of another religion. Our best guess about them is that they were Zoroastrians. That's a mouthful. That's a name that we give to a religion that thrived in the Fertile Crescent area from about 500 BC to about 500 AD, until it was just about wiped out by the Muslim conquests.

Zoroastrianism was a religion of ethics and moral improvement. It taught that there is a Creator God known as the Good Lord who is in battle with a lesser god known as the Destructive Spirit. And the battleground is this world, especially in the hearts and souls of human beings. At the end, the Good Lord will win and the resurrection of the dead will occur.

Within the bounds of Zoroastrianism, there was a lot of leeway for practice. That included astrology. And it may surprise you just how strongly astrology is condemned in the Bible. It's described as worthless, turning to false gods and dangerous.

But here we have the Magi astrologers and there's no condemnation of their practice of astrology. Why is that? Because followers of other religions, other faiths, are welcome to investigate Jesus. God loves it. He knows that the little bit of truth that you find in Buddhism or Shinto or Islam or even Zoroastrianism just may be a bridge into the full truth found in Jesus Christ.

In their case, their attention was caught by a celestial sign: "a star in the east." Our best guess is that this was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the eastern sky, which in the lore of the Magi would mean, "a king (since Jupiter was the planet of kings) of the Jews (since Saturn was somehow applied to the nation of

Israel) is to be born (because it was rising in the east).” On top of that, they may have had access to the book of Daniel, which actually contains a prophecy that pointed to the period of what we call the late 1st century BC and the early 1st century AD as a time when the Messiah king would come.

So they came: full of beliefs and ideas totally out of harmony with the faith of the Bible. But God said, come on. Come near. Come to My Son. Get the whole story with Him. Right now, you have puzzle pieces with no box to guide you. Here’s the Truth in person.

I’ve told you on other occasions about how when J. Christy Wilson was in Afghanistan—and this was years ago, from the late 50s to the early 70s—and Muslims would come to him and say, “I had a dream, and I saw a man tell me to come speak to you, that you tell the truth about God.” And then he would tell them about Jesus and these Muslims would put their faith in Him.

A few years ago, a woman raised in Taiwan, raised as a Buddhist, shared her experiences in a class I was teaching. Every tragedy in her life, her family and friends blamed her. Even when her husband died, she was told that she’d brought it on herself by wrong thinking.

I’ll never forget that. She was choking back tears as she described her the total desolation and sorrow and stigma that real life Buddhism—not the book Buddhism that sounds so noble—had brought her.

But then, God came in. Christian friends told her that her hardships weren’t her fault. Bit by bit, she began to open up to the gospel until the happy day she surrendered to His love. And I’ll never forget these words of hers:

"Everything Buddhism promised me, Jesus actually gives!"

The magi came, not just to satisfy a curiosity, but out of a real hunger for spiritual truth. Why else mount a distant, dangerous, cross-cultural journey?

There are a lot of people in this room who also crossed a cultural barrier to come to America and to find a new life here. Do you realize that you are the modern Magi? And some of you were raised in a different faith, or with no faith at all. And you need to know what the Magi discovered. You need to hear what the Magi heard: that God has a love for you. There's only one God, and we read about His love in the Bible. As a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or as an unbeliever, you could only have a little piece of the truth. But with Jesus, you get it all.

That leads to the last thing I've learned about following Jesus from the Magi:

While skeptics are welcome...
And followers of other religions are welcome...

Eventually, you have to bow before Jesus

And that's just what they did. Look at Matthew 2:11:

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

"They bowed down and worshipped Him." The Bible doesn't give the word *worship* away lightly. They saw the star, they asked for the right town (Bethlehem), and then a miracle occurred: a vision of the same star guiding

them to the exact house. They knew that was *impossible*. So they knew that this wasn't even just a king. He was The King; the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. He was the Answer to all their scholarly questions.

God's way isn't to send a philosophy or a system of living. It isn't to send a method or even a religion. God loved the world so much He sent His Son.

And the Son of God becomes the Answer. What is God like? Look to Jesus. How am I made right with God? Look to Jesus, and His atoning death on the cross. The answers to all the big questions are found in Him.

And so they bowed down and worshipped Him. And we're told that they opened their treasures and gave Him precious gifts.

The most precious gift I can give Jesus isn't gold, or incense or myrrh. It's my life, freely given in love and service to Him. It's my worship, straight from the heart. It's my hands to help others in His name, and to raise in holy prayer. It's my feet, moving out to take care of a need, to share the good news, to bring relief. It's my mind, filled with His truth, transformed to be like His own in love and faith and hope.

So what do I learn about following Jesus from the Magi? The main thing I learn is that **God has an open door for me**. That if I take a step toward God, He takes five steps toward me. And that Jesus really is the answer to my questions. In Him, I have a satisfied mind—and heart.

END
PRAYER