Springfield Presbyterian Church

January 7th, 2024

Stargazing

1. Introduction

This morning, we come upon the familiar story of three wise

men or Magi who knew the importance of a star and followed it to a Savior in a cradle. This was the star they had been waiting for – a star with great prophecy. And as we hear, before setting out, Herod puts in his request for an exact location upon the Magi’s return home.

As we think about the text, I want to dive into who these Magi were – who are these men? What was their role in society outside of the wonder of the star on that particular night? Why did they bring frankincense, myrrh, and gold as gifts? And perhaps, my biggest curiosity lies in what happened after they left the cradle. All of these questions can bring us to a clearer vision of what that night really looked like and what that night teaches us about living out our call to serve and honor Christ today.

1. Who are these people?

What is a Magi? We do not have them in modern culture, so

what were they doing in their everyday life and do we have any comparison in our modern culture? We know that Magi are also called wise men, so we can assume that they are scholars or have a certain skill that excels beyond the norm. That wisdom made them popular in the king’s court, which is probably why Herod thought his kinship with them would mean they would obey easily. They would interpret dreams, perform ceremonies, and were employed by the king and his constituents. Presumably, because of their stature in society, they probably lived well and were paid for their wisdom.

It may be hard to draw comparisons, but in our society, I imagine a Magi would be someone who worked for the government. They would carry wisdom in one particular field and when there is a call to investigate something more – they would be sent out as an ambassador of sorts.

Now, we know that there were probably several Magi who would have worked for Herod, but the story goes that three were sent out to this bright and shining star. We often assume it is three because there are three gifts, but the text never tells us it is three. Perhaps it was one Magi carrying three gifts, perhaps it was several – there’s no way to know. The narratives and artwork that follow in the middle ages until now, especially in our nativity show three – but again, there’s no way to know. Does it matter? Maybe, maybe not – but it is interesting to imagine a different story from the one that has been held for centuries.

iii. The Gifts

So, whether it’s three or one or many – the magi go to pay homage. What does homage mean? It means to pay respect or honor, and part of that process can be in giving gifts. As a modern day human, if I were given these gifts, I feel like my response would be a thoughtful and confused, “Thanks?” So, why these presents?

Gold is the easiest one to start with – because we still love gold in society. When you propose, maybe you get a fine gold ring. Gold, because it is hard to mine and find, makes it expensive, and in giving gold, it says to the recipient – we give this gift of wealth, honor, respect, power, and majesty to you; we exalt you.

The other two gifts are a little harder for us to unpack. Myrrh was also expensive in ancient times. It was believed that it held healing properties, could be used for perfumes and incense, and was aromatic in nature. Only those of esteemed society could have ever afforded such a gift, so it makes sense Jesus would receive it. As for frankincense, it comes from the bark of a tree, and it would be very difficult to gather – so it is another rarity that makes it expensive. We also know that frankincense and myrrh were used throughout Scripture, often in the temple and in sacred ceremonies, so it is fair to assume that the Magi saw Jesus as one deserving of these fine and sacred gifts that have been used for centuries.

1. Just for a laugh

So, if you fell asleep during my scholarly examination, now is the

time to wake up, because I’m going to offer a funny and then get into something I find fascinating and I think really paints a great picture of what we are called to do with this story.

So, here’s your funny for the day. I wanted to share this meme with you – I’m not sure who made it, but I love the three ‘wiser women’ who brought diapers, casserole, and formula. I know we could make a gendered comment, but it makes me laugh because those gifts are really for Mary. Oh, Mary, you’ve been through a lot here. We’ve got your back, sister.

I hope you’ll take this image with you and have a good laugh and share it with friends.

1. What next

Okay, so let’s get to the ‘why is this story important to me now?’

For me, this is the first time in my reading where I thought to myself, ‘we know where the magi come from, we know the gifts, we know some of their story, but all we hear is that they go home by a different road to avoid Herod.’ And then there’s silence – we don’t hear that they made it home safe and sound and everything was peachy. There’s a few different traditions who speculate about what happens to them – but none of it is great.

Chances are, and this is an educated guess, that when they got home, things did not go well. Herod probably found them, unless they managed to hide out for the rest of their lives – and if so, hiding for the rest of your life is not a best case scenario. Yet, it is better than the other reality – what if Herod finds them, and Herod knows they did not listen, they didn’t come back with a report on Jesus – so he’s mad. Herod, as we know, isn’t the nicest guy on the block, and that’s putting it politely. Finding and loving Jesus, especially for the Magi, was life-changing and life-altering, in both good and bad ways.

I don’t tell you this to bum you out, but it’s a reality we have to face. When we honor Jesus, when we claim Jesus as Savior – sometimes it doesn’t go well. That’s part of the call. It doesn’t mean we need to martyr ourselves, but it does mean that sometimes we have to stand up for what is right because our faith teaches us something outside of the norms of society.

This means that we sometimes disobey what society tells us. And we’re taught this in other places of Scripture – we stand up for justice, even when it’s tough – we stand up for the oppressed, for the lowly, for the hungry, for the hurting. We are called to stand up and say – something has to change and we can no longer be compliant in a world that does not show love to all and honor the belovedness of every person and living thing. We have to be like the Magi sometimes – we may need to take a different road home, we may need to take a different approach as followers of Christ.

Everyone is going to have a different call here – but my question to you this morning, alike the Magi is – what can you no longer stand by? What is the different road home for you? What is going to move you to risk your place in society and stand up for what is right? What are you passionate about – how does that intersect with your faith? What are you willing to do today, how are you going to change, after the Savior of the world is born?

The answers are different for us all, but if you’d like a tangible example from me, here’s one. We are a community of faith that is LGBTQ+ affirming, and ultimately, I know I’m safe here. What I know is that there are many LGBTQ+ people who are not safe. I have to ask myself, in light of this story, in the days to come – what am I willing to do, what am I willing to risk, to make sure that my siblings are safe? How does my action go beyond pen and paper, to something more? It’s not easy, faith was never supposed to be easy – but this the work of faith, this is the work of Christ.

So, my friends, whatever your passion is, may you be like the Magi, may you give honor to God, and then from that experience, may you be led by another path to faithful action and service. Alleluia and amen.