

“A Picture of Faith ”

Wise men – kings from the east – Magi: have you ever really stopped to think who these people were? I can tell you that there is a lot more we DON'T know about them, then the small amount that we DO know.

- Who are they,
- where did they come from,
- how many of them were there,
- and when did they get to Bethlehem?

Many times you will hear these men referred to as “The Three Wise Men,” or as we sang this morning, the beautiful “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Actually, there is no evidence to support three people at all. We know that there were 3 gifts because Scripture tells us that three gifts were offered but there could have been any number of wise men. Some believe that the “Wise men” were a group of astronomers from the Mesopotamia area – that is certainly east of Jerusalem. Even though we sang that beautiful traditional hymn “We Three Kings of Orient Are” – there is nothing in the Bible to suggest that these people were kings at all. I want to suggest to you that their entourage must have been pretty large and unique – for the King to take notice of them, and as the Gospel said – the people; all of Jerusalem was disturbed with Herod. The image that we have of 3 men and their camels is pretty much not what really took place. Tradition has even given these visitors with names – 3 of them – Gaspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Since the Bible does not mention this – we have no way of knowing the validity of this tradition. Please understand that I am not trying to blow holes in the tradition that we have celebrated for 2,000 years, but I just want to shed some light on the truth of the matter, and it does not lessen at all what these people brought and to whom they brought it. We also can draw the conclusion that these Magi were Gentiles – coming from the east – the land of the Gentiles. This clearly shows us that people of all nations acknowledge Jesus as “King of Kings.” What was it that they said to Herod? *“So we can go and worship Him.”* There has to be belief in order to worship! There can be no worship without belief. It is important to note that the term Magi – comes from the Greek “Magos” “μάγος” which means “wise man,” “astrologer,” “sorcerer,” or “magician.” In any case – these men knew and studied the scriptures, believed them enough to go on a very long journey to follow the star, and they recognized the significance of Jesus as God's own Messiah and King. These were pretty wise men – to be able to recognize that and to go on this journey.

The Magi, coming into Jerusalem, approached King Herod seeking information concerning the newborn King – “The King of the Jews.” There is another misconception about this account and it is concerning the timeline this event took place. These men did not find “the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes” in the manger. In the verses from today's Holy Gospel, Jesus is referred to as “the young child” and they came to Him in a house, and not a stable. So some time had passed since the birth of the baby, and apparently Joseph and Mary moved into a house in Bethlehem, awaiting further instructions from God.

There is also more evidence of the timeline found in Herod's attempt to destroy the Christ. When Herod saw that he was outwitted by the wise men, he sent his decree to begin the unthinkable slaughter of all the males 2 years of age and under in Bethlehem, and the surrounding area. As was foretold - Rachel was weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, the evil had been done.

We are told that after speaking with the "wise men" that King Herod "was disturbed." He called the chief priest and scribes together and questions them about the Messiah's birthplace. He is told that He was to be born in Bethlehem. They simply told him what the Word of God proclaimed through 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."* (Matthew 2:6) It is rather interesting that the Jewish leaders knew the prophecies but didn't care enough to go and see for themselves. Remember what the Gospel said today – King Herod was disturbed, and so was all of Jerusalem. So much could be said about their apathy. Instead, here were a group of Gentiles who were willing to cross a desert, to follow a star, to offer gifts, and to offer worship from their hearts! After consulting with the scribes and Chief Priests, Herod sent them to Bethlehem to search diligently for the child. Herod pretends that he desires to worship the King of the Jews as well. Quite interesting that Herod, who was king over the Jewish people, was not a Jew himself. Let me give you some of his background. He came from the line of Ishmael, remember Abraham? Ishmael, was the son who was not born of the promise, but out of impatience. Abraham had a son named Isaac. Now there is something more you should know – Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau got angry because he had sold his birthright for a bowl of stew to his brother. Esau took off and went and married his cousin, the daughter of Ishmael! They took off and went to a place called Edom. King Herod came from the land of Edom, descending from Esau and not Jacob. No wonder he was worried for his job – a true King of the Jews might take his kingdom away – or so he thought.

The "wise men" do eventually reach the Savior. God leads this entourage with this star directly to the home where Jesus is staying. They fell before the King and offered Him – Gold – a traditional gift for a king. I can just picture one of these men kneeling down before this child and saying – "gold for the King of Kings." But then again, that is my speculation – and not from the Word of God. So, gold for a king was brought, then Frankincense – a symbol of His Kingly role and lastly Myrrh - a bitter gum and costly perfume which oozes from a certain tree or shrub in Arabia and Ethiopia, or it can be obtained by incisions made in the bark: as an antiseptic it was used for embalming – a foreshadowing of Jesus' death and burial. Isn't it interesting that these men, no matter how many of them there were, had planned all along, from the beginning of their journey, to visit a king, and so they brought these gifts? They didn't just pick them up along the way! There were no Belk's, no place to go, no Walmart, no K-Mart! They had packed these gifts from the very start of their journey. When they got there, they were overjoyed!

Second Sunday After Christmas – Feast of the Epiphany – January 3, 2016, Year C

After the time of worship, God warns these men in a dream of Herod's plan to destroy Jesus, and as a result the magi and their entourage depart another way.

There are many people who just don't recognize God! They see His work all around them but they give the credit to everything else (mankind, Mother Nature, angels, anything and everything but God). God was trying to show these men something special and they were blessed to observe the Savior first hand. Today God is doing the very same thing. He truly desires that lost people would see His son for who He really is – the Savior of the whole world. The world only needs to open their eyes and see Him for who He truly is.

These men did not only open their eyes, they opened their hearts. I'll bet that there were some people who saw the star but kept on with their daily lives and simply ignored it! These men opened their hearts to what God was trying to show them.

Many today see God at work and actually DO know that it is God who is working. They just don't care. There are many who really do believe that Jesus is Savior and the ONLY way to heaven... but the others just don't care! They refuse to open their hearts – I pray, and I hope that you will join me, that God will open eyes, ears, hearts and minds on this Epiphany to His Son, the King of Kings!

It is believed that the Magi followed this star for approximately 2 years. What a picture of faith! They followed a light in the sky. They didn't know how long the journey would be. They didn't know what they would encounter along the way. They didn't know exactly what they would find when they reached their destination. Regardless of what the journey held, they followed God. They relied on the Lord!

That, my brothers and sisters, is exactly what we must do! That is the kind of faith that we must have. We must rely on God! As Christians, as St. Andrew's Anglican Church - we are following a God given direction. We don't know how long our journey will be. We don't know what we will encounter along the way. We don't know what we will find when we reach our destination but we continue on, in grateful obedience because we trust God and His Holy Word! Just look at the examples of these men – with a faith that gave them great joy – let each one of us seek God's guidance, direction, wisdom, and joy.