

“Do the Wise Still Seek Him?”
Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Mark McDaniel
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The sky was black, the air was crisp, and the stars were close enough to touch—or so it seemed. Occasionally, a speck of dust or a pebble—remnants of a comet that had long ago lost the tug of war between Jupiter and the Sun—would enter the atmosphere and streak across the sky, leaving behind a thread of light that flashed into brilliance, then grew dim until it had faded into the darkness. Very occasionally, a bigger brother of those specks and pebbles would burn bright enough to cast a fleeting shadow on the snow, like a glimpse of something spectral seen out of the corner of the eye.

Two figures sat on a picnic table in the church yard, with their boots on the seats, watching the sky. After a particularly bright flash down near the horizon, the younger figure said quietly, "Did you ever wonder what it was the wise men saw in the sky, Dad? Was it a comet, or a meteor—or what?"

The older one said, "Hard knowing. For a long time people assumed it was a comet, because comets were viewed as messengers. The only trouble was comets—normal comets, anyway—don't behave the way the sign in the sky behaved for the wise men. So when people started understanding more about what happens in the sky, they started to believe maybe the Christmas Star was a nova or a supernova."

"You mean, like, when a star explodes?"

"Exactly. Novas usually don't appear as visible stars until they explode and that would explain why the Magi took notice of it—it would look like a new star being born, which they could interpret as a new ruler being born on earth. But that didn't exactly wash either—Matthew definitely tells us the sign moves, and novas don't do that."

"So, what was it, then?"

"There's the astrological explanation—that it was the conjunction of certain planets taking place over a period of time, moving through the constellations, which could happen, the way I understand it. And that would make sense, because the Magi were probably astrologers." He paused, studying the distant stars and sighed to himself. "Or there's my explanation."

"Which is?"

"That we'll never know. I often wonder if something utterly remarkable happened in the skies around the time Jesus was born—something so amazing that it brought wise men from hundreds of miles away, and also caused the shepherds to come to Bethlehem, as Luke recorded it—and maybe got retold two different ways, when the gospels were written generations later, with Luke recording the event as angels greeting shepherds, and Matthew as some kind of astronomical phenomenon. Both announced the birth of Jesus, both caused people to come and worship him."

"So, it's a mystery?"

"Yep."

"But that's not really an explanation, then. Just a cop-out, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"Yeah. You said that something happened that night—wouldn't you like to know what it was? Wouldn't you like to be a wise man to know for sure that this sign had been given to you?"

"I'll have you know," Randall said with quiet dignity, "that there are plenty of people who consider me a wise man, already. But seriously, your question really is, wouldn't I like to have proof? Wouldn't it be nice to be able to prove, once and for all, what happened—because that would be evidence that we could point to as proof of what we believe? Wouldn't it be nice to find a 2,000-year-old star chart from the wise men?"

"Wouldn't it?"

Randall shrugged. "Sure. It would be nice to have a lot of things—but I don't need to have them to believe. I get my sign every day when the sun comes up and every night when I look up at the sky. I get my sign whenever I see a newborn baby. If that isn't a call from God to us—if that isn't God getting our attention—then I don't know what is."

"So, you don't care what the wise men saw in the sky?"

Randall smiled. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious—but I know that what they saw in the sky isn't nearly as important as what happened in their hearts when they found Jesus. And that's the same for all of us—what happens after we come face-to-face with Jesus is what matters, not the road we took to get there."

There was another long silence, and then his son shifted and straightened up. "Are you cold, Dad?"

"Freezing, Bud. Are you ready?"

"Let's go." They slid off the table, started walking toward the parsonage, boots crunching in the snow. They were halfway there when Randall's son impulsively reached out and took his hand for the rest of the walk.

In the darkness, Randall smiled. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh had their place... but it was love that really mattered.

(Conversation on a Winter's Night by Keith Hewitt)

So, these "wise men from the East" saw a star in the sky, or a comet, or a conjunction of the planets—or maybe even a bright angel—and they followed it—they were drawn to it. What were they looking for—what did they hope to find? Their epiphany, as well as our Epiphany, was the recognition that the ancient Hebrew prophecies of the Messiah had become a reality. And, how did these men come to that knowledge?

Well, some of their wisdom came from being studious. They not only knew the history of their own country, but they knew the histories of many countries. They had searched their own past and their own sacred texts, as well as those from other nations. They knew the signs for which they should be aware. And their hearts and their minds were open to those possibilities, so that they demonstrated a willingness to recognize the sign when it appeared.

Of course, these wise men did not gain their knowledge only from scrolls and manuscript. Not only did they know the prophecies, but they were perceptive enough to be aware of what was happening in the world around them. If not for their discipline to their craft, the Gentile world might have completely missed Christ's Epiphany.

With guidance from the past and an obvious sign in the present, they were willing to strike out on a quest to confirm what they had read about and what they had witnessed in the sky. They didn't sit around speculating on what this sign might mean, but they were willing to invest time, and effort, and even possible danger to follow this sign. They risked much to confirm that they were right—or discover that they were wrong!

The one very foolish thing that they did was to go to King Herod for directions, but how could they have known the danger. They went to the obvious place for a king to be born, the palace in the capitol city of that nation. Even these wise men were not yet aware of the type of king that would be born – in fact, how could anyone have anticipated that God would come to us in such a form?

And when they had found the child – this king prophesied in ancient manuscripts – they found the confirmation of their careful reading of and responding to the signs, they reacted with the gratitude and praise fit for a king.

So, what are we to make of this final episode tagged onto the end of the Christmas story? For most people, once the gifts are opened and the punchbowl is drained of eggnog, the Christmas season is over. Of course, New Year's Eve extends the holiday season a bit, but Epiphany? That's just a high churchy thing, isn't it? What could we possibly learn?

What can we make of the discipline demonstrated by the wise traveling scholars in Matthew's gospel? What might we gain if we chose to use their actions as model to seek a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ? We might begin with inspired and enthusiastic study – certainly study of Scripture, but also commentaries and devotional materials, study groups and prayer groups, corporate worship and personal meditation—all of these are means of devoting ourselves to a deeper understanding of that mysterious concept we call faith – and may even lead us to epiphanies of our own.

Of course, we don't want to spend all of our time buried in study, as though that is the only place we will find signs of Christ. Jesus made clear to us that we must be aware of what is going on in the world outside of our study – and become a part of it, to truly see the work of God in the world. Do we witness the things we read about? The pain, the loneliness the grief – the joy, the kindness, the love? Do we see the hand of God at work in the world?

And, when we witness that presence of God in the life of another, or in our own life, then it is time for us to express our joy and gratitude in ways that will honor God. An epiphany is not something to be hidden away, or stored on a shelf. An epiphany is something to be shared with the world. When I sense the presence of God in my life, I can't wait to tell you about it, and when you have a clear sense of God's presence in your life, I want you to tell me about it – as some of you already have. True spiritual maturity inspires generosity, rather than apprehension. It generates a desire to share the Good News, rather than hiding it away for our own personal use. The wise men again are our model in their giving of precious gifts and adulation.

In reading the story of the magi, we can learn from their discipline of study and exploration. We can rejoice in their discovery and their greeting of the Christ child. We can even imitate their generosity in the sharing of our gifts. But, most importantly, we can remember what Randall learned in the opening story—*Gold, frankincense, and myrrh had their place... but it was love that really mattered.*

AMEN