

A Star, 3 Kings, The Beginning, And the The End

Matthew 2:1-12

Cradock Presbyterian Church

January 6, 2013

I still have to laugh at all the hoopla about “the end of the world” stuff that was supposed to happen last month. I mean, *really*, Did anyone take that seriously? It seems like there’s always another group looking to predict the end of the world. And everybody looking for signs. Well, here’s a story about some other people looking for signs – and getting it right. The very fact that it was *these guys* who saw the signs drives home the point: God was signaling the end. Except it wasn’t really the end. It was a new beginning. That’s a powerful point. The truth about the Mayan calendar thing came out in late December: when the Mayans predicted an “end,” it was only an end to a particular age, or “cycle;” a *new* age, or new cycle, *always* began when the old one ended.

It doesn’t surprise me that we get the stories of Jesus’ birth all tangled up, out of our traditions, because after all it’s been some two thousand years. In my mind, that obscures the point that here is God doing something new. We’re all used to seeing the shepherds AND the three wise men, or the three kings from the orient, whatever you want to call them, all standing together around Mary and Joseph and Jesus and the farm animals. It’s likely that the three magi, the visitors from the east, came some time after Jesus’ birth. Those of you who attended Sunday School that last weekend before Christmas remember how Jesus was born in a house, and was probably staying with Joseph’s relatives in that house for some time. The scripture says that the Magi went

into the *house*. It's the same house Jesus was born in. No reference to time at all. You can infer that the star came into view at the time of Jesus' birth; there is a lot of emphasis there in Matthew about the exact time, with Herod wanting to know, and the Magi saying they saw "his" star *at its rising*, which kinda implies that it rose when Jesus "rose." Figure out the travel from Persia, and it could have been a couple of months later. Does it matter?

Another thing we get confused about, because of our traditions, is how bright this star was; we hear the accounts of how the heavens lit up around the shepherds, and we think, "Aha!, that was some bright star! Must have been an exploding supernova!" Well - did you read the texts of Luke and Matthew carefully? Matthew says only that they saw the star "at its rising." Doesn't say a thing about it being bright. And Luke says that "An angel of the Lord stood before them, and *the glory of the Lord shone around them.*" - nothing about a star at all. Fact is, it probably *wasn't* some awesomely bright star that everyone saw. We're getting the brightness thing confused with the Luke story. It was something only astronomers like would see.

Let's think about that. All Israel was supposed to be looking to God for its answers; and God is where? In heaven, of course. But Israel never spent much time looking at the stars. In Persia, they did. At the time of Jesus' birth, three Persian noblemen, the three whom the Bible calls *magi*, which can be translated "wise men" or "kings", saw the star when it first appeared. The translations of the Bible you're used to say they saw it "in the East", which means of course that they saw it as it first appeared

on the horizon, given the way the earth rotates. Since they studied the stars, they knew immediately that this was something new. They were bound to be excited; they believed that this meant the birth of a new king, because they believed that God or the gods would create a new star to signal a new king to any who were watching. But there was something else about this star – it was moving, as if beckoning them to come and follow! Now another thing about these Persian magi – they were well traveled, they were considered to be statesmen. So they knew the ways of the world. What do you do when you know there's a new king? They knew what to do. They packed up some expensive gifts, and went on their way, allowing the star to guide them.

Which do you think would be better? To try and get in good with a President who's just gotten elected, or to have been his or her friend since you went to day care together? It's the last, right? You want to get in on the ground floor! You'd like it, when the President moves into the WHite House, for one of the boxes to have a label on it that says, "stuff my friends gave me when I was little." And *your* stuff is in there! So it is with these three magi. I told you they were statesmen. After their comical interlude with Herod, they find their way to Jesus, who's still in the place where he was born. We can't do more than speculate about when exactly that was. Interestingly, the word used for Jesus at this point implies that he's a *toddler*, not a just-born infant. It's a different word than Luke uses to describe the new-born infant. The magi come and pay homage to Jesus as a newborn king. If the shepherds have already come with their message of Jesus as the messiah, who knows how Joseph and Mary received all of this? Too bad

the text doesn't say! But here's the second witness to Jesus their son as the one God has sent to redeem Israel. The magi have come at the beginning, and they have defined the king's beginning. And they've got gifts!

So they get out the gifts. And they're expensive gifts. Do you remember Christmases past? Especially when you were a young one? We have a couple of young ones here who remember a few days ago vividly! I think the biggest fun of Christmas is listening to what people say as they open their gifts. "Thanks you all! I really wanted this!" Or maybe even, "I really needed this! Thanks again!" I can imagine what Mary might have been saying to Joseph as she opened up the gifts for little Jesus: "Look at that gold! Man, Joseph, we got a great start on Jesus' college fund! Hey! Maybe we can get that big-screen Torah we've been wanting. Okay, what's this gift? Umh! Smell that frankincense! We'll be the envy of all the family when we go to Jerusalem next year and make our burnt offering. That's some good stuff, too! We've never had such good frankincense! And look here! That's the most beautiful myrrh I've ever seen! I don't know what we'll do with it though -- both our parents are kinda young, we probably won't need it for a while. But it'll keep, won't it? Thanks again, Persian guys. Those are some thoughtful and nice gifts!"

Oh Mary – if you only knew how thoughtful...

Here's the point to those gifts, which most people miss. In giving those gifts at the beginning of Jesus' life, those three kings were already defining the end. What do the gifts mean?

The meaning of the gold is easy enough to understand. Yes, it's what you give a king. And in any society ruled by a king, the king controls the gold. There are many examples in the Bible of kings getting or having gold. And the Magi have said they come looking for a king. It's the next two gifts that focus us. Frankincense is used at the temple when you offer a sacrifice of an animal. In Jesus' time, it was rarely used anywhere else. The frankincense gets sprinkled on the fire with the sacrifice, and it emits a nice smell; this makes the offering especially pleasing to God. It makes it more valuable. Myrrh was primarily used, almost exclusively used, to put on a Jewish person's body at burial. When the myrrh was applied to the person, his or her life was considered complete.

Are you getting the message? The frankincense tells us that Jesus, as a sacrificial offering, was especially pleasing to God. His offering was especially pleasing to God. The myrrh tells us that even now at the beginning, Jesus' purpose in life is to die. His life is now complete here at the beginning, because his end has already been annointed, by the myrrh in the hands of the three kings.

So, when you put it all together, here's what you get: Jesus was going to be the king who came to be a valuable, worthy, living sacrifice for his people.

Kinda takes your breath away, doesn't it?

Oh, and just one more thing - the guys who brought this message, the magi who thought enough to be looking at the stars - they were *Gentiles*, outsiders, people not of

the chosen people. It's to people like you and me, outsiders, that God chose to reveal the Good News.

It ought to be clear now, two weeks after Christmas, having heard from both Matthew and Luke, that the Good News of Jesus' birth was for you and me and anyone who would receive it. It seems to me that we often think we're about 2000 years too late to stand at the manger! No, we're really not. Revealing the birth first to the shepherds and then to the magi, God made sure that everyone, Gentile or poor person or foreigner, would hear it in his Good News: this God's for you! God chose outsiders for a reason – so outsiders like us, and billions before us, and billions more to come after us, would understand that they, too, get to share in the Good News.

We now leave the beginnings of Jesus' life, and starting with his baptism next week, we begin journeying down the road of his ministry towards Lent, and then his Passion, his death, and finally the glorious celebration of Easter morning, when the sacrifice that had its beginning in a lowly manger ended in a borrowed tomb, with glory. All we can say is, "Thanks, God! Those gifts the magi brought were really gifts for us, to help us understand. Thanks again!"

Let us pray. O God, we get the message - you don't exclude anyone. You picked foreigners to discover that you were changing the world, so that all nations and peoples would be eligible to come to you. So we come, O God, on knee, and we pray that our gifts are good enough. Help us, O God, to include EVERYONE, so that all the world will pay you homage. In Jesus' precious name we pray, AMEN.