

Welcoming Jesus Like the Wise Men
Matthew 2:1-12
12/24/23

Like a great light placed on a high hill, this king's birth was announced in the heavens for all to see [light fourth candle].

Think of this, when God created the stars and put the planets in their orbits, He put in motion the pen that would one day write the announcement of His Son's birth in the night sky. He synchronized it all so that when the time had fully come, human history would merge with cosmic history to announce His Son's arrival. Does that not cause some level of wonder to well up within you?

The wonder we feel is a minor reflection of what the wise men must have felt when they looked to the heavens and saw what they saw. Let's read the full story as Matthew shares it.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking,
²"Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

Wonder moved them to study the stars. Wonder moved them to disrupt their schedules and lives. And it was wonder that moved them to their knees when they met the young king. For them, it all began with the wonder found in the night sky.

I experienced that wonder in 1981. I was in Hocking Hills State Park with some college friends. Around midnight, we were in a large meadow, looking up at a cloudless night sky that was overflowing with stars. The Milky Way was clearly visible as we marveled at how big it was and how small we all felt. With softly spoken words I remember us sharing the wonder we felt because of what we saw.

In his book, *The Luminous Dusk*, Dale Allison says that our omnipresent, human-made, electrical lights are robbing us of our experience of the stars. He believes that “the stars...are the strongest natural stimuli to wonder, and wonder nurtures religious feelings and reflection” (8).

While a sky full of stars is a rare experience for us, it was a nightly reality for the Wise Men of Persia. It was their job to watch the movement of planets within the field of fixed stars.

We are not talking about astrology or horoscopes here. We are talking about God Almighty embedding within His creation signs that point to His redemptive story. And this star is not the only example. Psalm 19 tells us that the heavens declare God’s glory and Jesus told us that we would see signs and wonders in the heavens.

What did they see? It is possible to drill down and begin to recreate what this star likely was, but doing this will only distance us from the wonder and mystery. For a moment, just consider how the star is described.

- The star was something only the trained eye could see (Herod and others were surprised about the news).
- At the same time it was something everyone could see (the brightest star).
- It endured over time (Herod asked for when the star first appeared).
- It moved (it went ahead of them).
- It stopped (over Bethlehem).

Keep yourself from thinking about the movement of planets and retrograde motion for a moment and simply ponder what it would take for God to use the planets and stars with the same ease that we use paper and pen.

God’s message in the heavens told them that the time had come for the long-expected, Great King to be born. This was going to be the event of the century. To be part of it would require significant expense and a massive effort as they gathered servants and armed security and all the supplies needed to support their entourage for this six-month, round-trip journey. Even at great personal disruption and cost they were compelled to go and see it for themselves. We know what that is like.

This same kind of compulsion exists with us today. In a couple of months people will disrupt their schedules, spend money and take a trip to experience another cosmic event—the total eclipse of the sun. Whether 2,000 years ago or today, wonder is what prompts many to disrupt their lives so they can experience it for themselves.

There is another connection we have with the wise men. When it comes to the birth narrative, all the other characters were there when it happened, but not the wise men.

They were hundreds of miles away and a different culture when the angel visited Mary or announced the birth to the shepherds. While others received a personal message from heavenly beings, the wise men received an impersonal message from heavenly bodies.

In every way they were removed from the actual moment and late to the party. When they finally did enter the story Matthew says that Jesus was a young child (under two years old), and the family was living in a house.

Like the wise men, physical and cultural distance separates us from this story and the messengers who brought it to us were more natural than supernatural. Like them, we receive it and arrive after the event has already taken place. And also like them, God in His grace delights to include us too.

The wonder in what they saw compelled them to disrupt their lives, to leave what they knew and to embark on a journey that would change them forever.

Some in this room have been captivated by the same wonder. This story has disrupted your lives causing you to yield, to worship to witness and to wonder as you align your life with Christ's teaching.

Others know this same story, but you have yet to experience the kind of wonder that would cause you to disrupt your life. The wonder the wise men felt led them to serve this new king. Where does your wonder lead you today?

Mary and Joseph eventually made it back to Nazareth. The shepherds went back to their fields and the wise men returned to their own land. Everyone who makes the journey to Jesus will one day return to their home. But when they do, they return as a different person because they have been touched by Christ Jesus, the King.

Those who surrender their lives to Christ carry His Spirit within them. What He has, they now possess.

Jesus said, "I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). He also said to His disciples, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

Candle lighting

As His followers, you carry His Spirit, you carry His light into your part of the world. His light is given to us and we share it with others, one person at a time.

God's gift of light and life came to us one very special night; a night when God came down to be with us. We remember how Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Passing the Light of Christ

Songs: God With Us, Silent Night

Closing Remarks

The story of Jesus' birth changed the lives of those who experienced it, and it changes our lives too as, just like those who were part of this story, we learn to surrender to God's will, worship with our whole being, witness with joy, and live in the wonder of God's gift.

Friends, may you know and experience the good news that is for all people. A Savior has come. He is Christ, the Lord. Share this joy with the entire world.

Closing Song: Joy to the World!