

Epiphany, 2007 (1/06/07)
Reformation Lutheran Church
Matthew 2:1-12
“It Must Be A Miracle!”

It must have been a miracle. No one else noticed it (that we know of), and history doesn't record it. It appeared, and then disappeared, and then appeared again. The first time they could only follow it in a general direction – and then they stopped to ask for directions. But then, when it came back, it led them in a very precise way, to a particular address. It must have been a miracle.

I'm talking (of course) about the Star of Bethlehem that guided the Magi in the Gospel reading. I know a lot of effort has gone into trying to figure out if this was a super-nova or the unusual aligning of bright planets. But when you read what Matthew says the star was like, I don't think there's any other conclusion possible. No one else saw it, or if they did, they didn't know what it meant. And at first, it just got the Magi to the neighborhood, to Jerusalem – but then it reappeared and led them to a house. It must be a miracle.

There's more than one miracle in this reading. There's the Star of Bethlehem. Naturally, the greatest miracle is the Child himself. Promised for ages and now born – the Messiah! He's conceived in his mother not through a human father, but through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Virgin Mary – so he's Mary son, but not Joseph's; he's the Son of God. And he has come into the world to save his people from their sins. It's a miracle.

But there's one more miracle in this story, and that's the one I want us to try to see this evening. It's a miracle that we can actually relate to, and it's a miracle that is almost hidden by

the way verse 1 is translated in the fine version read and printed for us: “Behold, *wise men* from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?”” I mean, if they’re *wise men*, wouldn’t you expect them to come, seeking the Messiah? Even if they’re Gentiles, that wouldn’t matter much – since they are *wise men*. To call them “wise men” takes all the miracle out of the fact that they are there, come to worship the newborn King.

But the New International version and the NAS help us out here, and we are going to follow their translation so that we can see the miracle, and come to share in it. “Behold, *Magi* from the East came to Jerusalem.” Magi – what are Magi? When we stop and realize the answer to this question, we’ll see why Matthew did not write, “Oh, and by the way, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem.” He wrote, “Behold! Look! LOOK! *Magi* from the East.” It’s a miracle.

We have to get rid of the idea that the Magi are “wise men” in the sense that they are learned in things that matter. We must NOT think of the Magi as “smart enough to figure out” the birth of Christ. In fact, the things that they probably were smart in are things that would cause us to shudder and run away if real Magi came into the sanctuary.

Magi (the Greek word in the plural is “magoi” and in the singular “magos”) appear in two other places in the Bible. The first is in the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel, chapter 2, a story that at least some of you will remember. King Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan, godless, idolatrous ruler of Babylon has had a dream, and he wants the dream’s meaning interpreted to him. To make the story short, it turns out that only Daniel, who really is a wise man, ends up

interpreting the king's dream correctly. But before Daniel gets into the act, in Dan 2:2 Nebuchadnezzar summons people to his side to ask their help. He calls his magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers and the Chaldeans. He call his *magicians* – but they can't figure the dream out. His magicians are His magi – our English word “magic” actually comes from the term “magi.” These are not “wise men” in any godly sense. They are sorcerers; they worship evil, false gods, and they are only “wise” in all the wrong things.

The second place that a “magos” (just one) appears is in the New Testament, in Acts 13. Paul and Barnabas have begun their first missionary journey, and the first place they go is Cyprus. There Paul preaches Christ to the local leading official, Sergius Paulus – but Paul gets opposition from a wicked man named Elymas, who is described as a . . . magos; a magician, a sorcerer. Paul says to him, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all unrighteousness, full of all deceit and villainy” and he blinds him with the Lord's power.

OK – are you ready? Magi practice magic, they serve pagan rulers, they are sorcerers and they are not wise in the godly, right sense of the term “wise.” Everything we know from the Bible and even from other Jewish sources in the time period tells us the same thing. The Magi are not “smart enough to figure it out.” They are the LEAST likely people you would expect to come and worship the new born Messiah and King!!

So – it must be the third miracle in the story. It MUST be a miracle of God that brings the Magi to verse 1 where Matthew writes, “now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, BEHOND, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem.” It's a miracle. God showed a star to the

Magi. And God revealed to them – we don't know how He did it – God revealed his promises to the Magi. And these foreign, twisted, wicked men believed God's message about a new King, THE new King. They believed, and they journeyed long to find him, and they've brought him gifts. It's a miracle that they are there. And no, they can't possibly understand everything there is to know about this new Child-King. But through a miracle they have come and they know that Jesus has come to be not only the King for the Jews, but also the saving Ruler for all people, for Gentiles – even for Magi. It must be a miracle.

So there's miracles here tonight, at Epiphany – four of them. Four? Oh, did I say “three” before? Let's see. There's the birth of the Messiah, God's Son, as a helpless child, that's one. Then there's the Star, that's two. Then, “Behold, *Magi* from the East” came to worship the new-born King, that's three. But look. Behold. You are here. That's four. You are here, tonight. I want you to believe that this is the fourth miracle this Epiphany.

See, like the Magi, you and I shouldn't be here. We're not “qualified” to come and worship the King, the Son of God. The longer you've been a Christian, the easier it is to forget this. And if we do forget it, we run the risk of losing great joy, and of falling into great sin. Ponder, then, with me this fourth miracle: Behold, WE are here to worship the new-born King.

The fact that we are here, believing, seeking, says really nothing about us. We started our lives, turned in the wrong direction – we call it original sin, and we're all infected with it. As much as we love our babies, we can see it in them – willfulness and self-centeredness. It doesn't make us likely candidates for faith, does it?

And maybe you were baptized as an infant, and yes, God's grace came to you then. But

why have you remained (or returned!) to the faith, to be here tonight? It is because of your intelligence? Your learning? Your determination? Far more intelligent or learned or determined people that you or I have left the faith long ago, and wandered away into sin and unbelief. What are you doing here?

Don't you remember the ways that you could have gone wrong? The times when sin started to get a real hold on you and drag you away? It might have been a comparing kind of pride, where you put other people down and you build yourself up and you start following that pride that leads down the road to hell and damnation. What about those times of loneliness and fear, when you started to panic and run, run for any pleasure or any excuse that would make the fear go away? Do you remember when you started thinking about that your stuff, your priorities were the ones that mattered, and so there just wasn't time or energy for Christ – he became a part of your life. You fooled yourself; you thought he could just be a part of your life and you could set him over to the side and use him when you needed him. Or maybe that's happening right now, maybe today I'm heading down that road that leads to death. Or maybe you've gone down one of those roads, and now you're back.

All the ways that we could have gone wrong – from the moment of our birth to this very night. Why are we here tonight? Why are you here? It must be a miracle – just like the Magi – a miracle that God has opened the truth up to you and God has shown you the meaning of His Son, and God has drawn you to come and worship.

Is there a place here, for people like me? For sinners like you? It's a miracle! Look! Magi from the East came. Behold! Gentiles from Saint Louis came! And we do find a place –

not in Jerusalem, not in power and force and fear and pride, but at the house that no one knew about unless God had revealed it to them, the house where the mother and her Child were. Her Child.

There IS a place for people like us with this Child. He comes to fulfill the Scriptures of Israel, as the Messiah of the Jews – but he is the Chosen One also for people who were far away from God’s promises, people like you and me. It doesn’t work so well if you approach him thinking that you have something to give him, though. Yes, the Magi brought gifts. But that doesn’t mean we have anything really to give him. Don’t try to offer him your intelligence, or your experience, or your wisdom or even your faith. Don’t approach Jesus as if you were a “wise man.” Approach him, well, empty-handed, like one of the Magi.

This Child has come for the empty. He will grow up, and minister to the empty, to the poor in spirit. This King is unusual – he rules in mercy, and his power is made known chiefly in pity. Oh, he can be rough all right – he’s tough on people who think they are wise, in fact, who think they have what it takes, who think they can measure up. Those people he condemns, and rejects, and judges.

But for all who are needy, he comes in gentleness, to meet their need. Come to him, again this night! To you who come to him with sins, he responds by powerfully suffering, on a cross; he forgives your sins. If you’ve been wandering away in sin and self-delusion, he will take you back. To you who live in the shadow of death, unable to stop the sickness and the dying; for you he rises from the dead and he promises that because of the miracle, because you cling to him by faith, you will rise from sickness and death on the day when the morning dawns

from on high and the King returns and the light of Epiphany will shine everywhere and always.

It must be a miracle; here we are, preparing to come forward to the table. Just as the miracle happened for the Magi – the *MAGI!* – and they came in faith to the Messiah, so you will come in faith to Christ's promise in this bread and in this wine. There is no one right way physically to receive this gift – in your mouth directly, or on your palm or however. But if you would – as you are kneeling or standing, believing that there Christ's own body and blood will nourish and forgive and support you – say to yourself: "This must be a miracle."

Four miracles. That we are here, in faith, this night. That the Magi came in faith, unlikely believers though they were. The Star of Bethlehem. And the Child. We worship a God who performs miracles. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.