

THEY CAME SEEKING

West Epping Uniting Church
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Matthew 2:1-12

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As a young boy with a huge imagination, I was intrigued by such mysterious figures as The Lone Ranger. Many an afternoon was spent in front of our old black and white TV watching this mysteriously masked good guy roam the countryside on Silver, his fiery horse. With his identity concealed, to add to the mystique, The Lone Ranger was always on a mission to bring law and order to the wild west.

Then there was Robin Hood, a legendary hero who championed the rights of the common people while remaining loyal to the rightful king of England. Robin Hood's covert activities took place in Sherwood Forest where he and his merry men ambushed the rich and distributed the spoils to a much deserving poor.

Both these heroes are rather obscure in character. But they are clear in their intent and in their actions. Their mission has purpose and clarity. And this is to bring about justice. It is to defend the rights of the vulnerable and the poor.

Today we encounter some other rather obscure, mysterious figures. The Bible doesn't tell us much about who they are. However, their mission is clear. They play a vital part in the Christmas story.

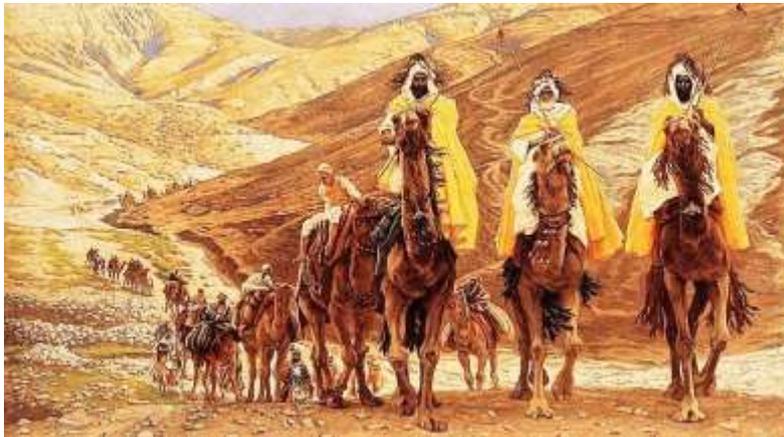
These figures are, of course, the Magi or Wise Men from the East who come to pay homage to the child, Jesus, and to recognise him as the new born king. The origin of the Magi is ill-defined as the "East" is simply identified as "the rising", that is, the rising of the sun. The Latin "oriens" from which we get the term "orient" has the same meaning.

Moreover, these visitors from the East were most likely not, as tradition leads us to believe, kings. They were astrologers, star-gazers or people who looked for and interpreted signs in the sky. Some suggest these mysterious visitors were priests from the ancient Zoroastrian faith in Persia.

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Meanwhile a document dating from the second century known as the “Revelation of the Magi” suggests they were mystics from the land of Shir. Located possibly as far away as China, these mysterious visitors (and there could have been more than 12 of them) were said to be descendants of Seth the third son of Adam. They functioned as guardians of a prophecy claiming a star of indescribable brightness would one day appear heralding the birth of God in human form.

Now, a lot of this is possibly speculation. However, the Magi play a key role in this Christmas season. They come to acknowledge this new born child as the Christ – the anointed one. They come, not as Jews or as believers in Israel’s faith. They come with no connection with the Jewish people, with their prophets or their hopes. Rather they come as outsiders, as foreigners, as pagans from a land so far away that it could be on very edge of civilization as the world knew it at the time.



Friends, these Magi come with one thing in mind - that is to pay homage to the Christ. They come to acknowledge and worship the new born king, “Emmanuel” – God with us, the saviour of the world!

This is important. For, the arrival of the Magi tells us this is no ordinary story. Rather, it’s a story bearing witness to an event that has implications not just for the people of Israel but for the whole world.

The arrival of these mysterious foreigners, these men from the remote orient bears witness to the promise made right back at the beginning when Abraham is blessed with a mission that involves all the peoples of the world. Moreover, the Magi’s visit bears witness to the prophet Isaiah’s vision of salvation that reaches out to all the nations. It undergirds John’s statement in Revelation, the last book of the Bible, where the coming of Jesus is for every nation, every tribe and all the people of this world.

So, you see, the visit of the Magi states unequivocally that the birth of Jesus is for all people. The coming of the Saviour is for everyone. There are no insiders or outsiders. Everyone, and I mean, everyone is included in God’s plan for salvation.

This taps into Paul’s passion for the Gospel as he addresses the early church in Philippi with the proclamation that every tongue will confess Jesus as Lord.

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Meanwhile in his letter to the Galatians Paul celebrates the wonderful truth that Jesus abolishes the barriers of nation, race and ethnicity. Jesus transcends the boundaries of gender, social status and economic circumstance.

For *“There is no longer Jew of Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male or female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”.* (Galatians 3:28.)

As one commentator says: *“God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, and to Magi via a star on Epiphany. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God’s reach, God’s embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God’s embrace.”*

Now it also important to note that the Magi did not come looking for Jesus through the effects of preaching. They did not come through the impact of evangelism or the influence of hospitality. The Magi did not come to pay homage to the Christ child as a result of a carefully crafted mission plan or a strategically set up outreach program.

The Magi came to Jesus as seekers. They came looking for Christ. They searched the night skies for signs and they followed their own hunches as God tapped into their lives in ways that just didn’t add up for the most pious believer. There was more mystery here than formula. There was more mystique here than coherency. For God acted in the lives of these Magi to prompt their seeking in ways that simply could not be defined or contained within an established orthodox creed or devout doctrinal statements.

And this says a lot. It says one doesn’t have to have all the principles of faith correct before encountering Christ. One doesn’t have to have an extensive biblical knowledge to experience Jesus. One does not have to sign up to a clearly defined doctrinal code before calling oneself a Christian.



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The thing that mattered most for the Magi is this - they were seekers. The Magi went looking for the truth. Even though they had little or no biblical knowledge. Even though they came out of a tradition of astrology that probably conflicted with orthodox Judaism and the early Christian church, their efforts in seeking the truth paid off as they followed the star, journeyed many miles to Bethlehem to enter the house and see the child with Mary his mother.

Friends, in all of this, open and honest seeking is a vital step to faith. And this means we, too, ought to constantly look around for signs – for signs of God’s presence and for God’s handiwork in all sorts of places.

For the Magi this was the night sky. For us it may be an event, a cause, a challenge. It may be a friend, a colleague or a neighbour. It may be an experience, a major transition in life or a relationship with another.

In all of this, we should continue to seek. We should continue to look for signs of God in the world around us. We should continue to enter into the mystery of God that is there in the midst of our very own lives.

And importantly it means we should also be open to others who are seeking. So much of what we talk about and do within the life of the church concerns us wanting to reach out to others and to evangelise. But have we ever considered being simply there for those who come seeking?

I believe the most critical thing we can do every Sunday is to simply open our doors wide and be there for everyone who enters this place.

People do come seeking and I am aware some stay. But others do not. There are many in our community who have a longing for God, a real thirst for the truth. But they are alienated, they are put off by the church because we demand conformity, we cling to certainty, we become inflexible and dogmatic, we establish cliques, we fear change and we fail to be the welcoming community we claim to be.

Think about it. Do you come to church because you are honestly and openly seeking God? Do you come here looking for the one who is born to save? Or do you come to church to be comforted, to cling to certainty and to feel good?

Do you come to church with an openness to the searching of others? Do you come ready to welcome all those who seek, to sit down and share the journey with them, to value and to include them? Or do you come to church to share with those of a like-mind and to relish in the security of all being the same?

The Magi are key players in the Christmas story. They were outsiders who came searching. They were pagans who came to believe. They were foreigners who became friends. They were seekers who found the truth. And they returned home having found what they were looking for.

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Do you come here today honestly and openly seeking? Are you ready to welcome and receive others who also come to seek?

The mystery today is this - Christ is born - God becomes one with us. God becomes one with all people. This is what we seek. This is what the whole world yearns for.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, go on, then, and seek. Go on and welcome the seekers among you.

Like the Magi of old, you will not be disappointed. You will not go away empty handed!

Amen.

