

Matthew 2:1-12
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How Wide Is The Circle of God's Grace?

What are we to make of this strange and wonderful story of Persian astrologers coming to pay homage to Jesus during the first few weeks (or months) of his life? Actually, the story is found only in the Gospel According to Matthew, and there is precious little real information given about them. We don't know how many there were ... but three gifts are named ... so it is assumed there were three of them. I've heard the claim was made that there **MUST** have been at least one **WOMAN** among them, because they stopped in Jerusalem to ask for **DIRECTIONS!** (Like I said, we don't have much information about them.)

This mysterious appearance, however, has become a fixture in the traditional Christmas story. It makes the nativity scenes more dramatic and busy having the **Wise Men** kneeling there, along with the shepherds and their sheep, a donkey and, of course, Mary and Joseph and the **Baby Jesus** ... a sweet and sacred scene that comes to mind whenever we think of Christmas.

But, I return to my original question: What are we to make of this strange story? What is the significance of the appearance of these mysterious figures from Eastern lands? And especially: What is its relevance for Christians in the Western World living in the 21st Century?

Whatever it was that brought those inquiring minds across the vast expanse of desert from present day Iraq to the streets of Jerusalem and then nine miles to the south, to Bethlehem, it is clearly worth our attention. In all likelihood, they were part of an educated and priestly tribe in Persia, called the "Magoi," or "Magi." This group was highly sophisticated in their observations of the movement of the heavenly bodies, seeking to relate the movements of the planets and stars to earthly events in the affairs of human civilization. They were likely familiar with some of the Hebrew religious traditions preserved from the days when many of the Jews were in exile in Babylon ... in their land ... a few centuries earlier. William Barclay gives us this fascinating historical detail: In the years 5 to 2 B.C., there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon. In these years, on the first day of the Egyptian month Messori, Sirius, the Dog Star, rose at sunrise and shone with extraordinary brilliance. Now, the name Messori means the "birth of a prince," and to those ancient astrologers such a star would undoubtedly mean the birth of some great king. We cannot tell what star the Magi saw; but it was their profession to watch the heavens and some heavenly brilliance spoke to them of the entry of a king into the world.

This story is included in Matthew's Gospel, however, because it points to the utter uniqueness of this particular birth. At the deepest level, I believe this story is about how **WIDE THE CIRCLE OF GOD'S GRACE ACTUALLY IS**. It makes the Christmas Story - and the **WHOLE** of the Gospel- a story that belongs to all of humanity ... a story that will change the whole course of human history!

The arrival of these wealthy foreigners signals that this child born to Joseph and Mary brings good news that will reach far beyond any of the conventional boundaries of tribal, national, ethnic or even religious distinction. This child is destined to be more than merely a local liberator or national monarch. This is one who will **CHANGE EVERYTHING**. The hopes of all people who have waited and longed for a life of **PEACE**, a life of **BLESSING**, are realized in this child! Nothing less than such great good news could bring this sophisticated band of travelers to their knees, offering their most precious gifts.

Monotheism - the belief in one god - actually originated in ancient Persia and among the Hebrews at about the same time. However, monotheism was still held to be a loyalty to one god who is **OUR** God, as opposed to the gods that others serve. At its worst, religious practices and the gods they addressed were called upon to support the cause

of one tribe or clan against their enemies, so references to “Our God” were really appeals to a tough warrior who would help them triumph over their enemies. When the world is seen as “Us against Them,” then our gods become little more than champions of Our particular cause. So it would be very ODD, indeed, for religious leaders from one culture or civilization to cross over to pay homage to a deity of another civilization

These WISE MEN, then, were taking a LEAP that few people in their time could comprehend - even the Hebrews, who saw Yahweh, or Elohim, to be ABOVE other gods. These Wise Men knew of a God who was Creator and Lord over the whole Creation! And it was the birth of this child that announced the entrance of this God of All into human history. They somehow grasped that this was a God worthy to be worshipped. They somehow knew the good news that God, who created everything, intended to BLESS and not CURSE what He had created ... even humankind with all of their flaws!

The Good News we celebrate today around this table is that **THE CIRCLE OF GOD’S GRACE IS AS BOUNDLESS AS THE LOVE OF GOD FOR ALL OF US!!** Now, I admit that is a hard TRUTH to comprehend. There is too much evil and too many evil people in this world for most of us to rest easy with such good news if it means that **EVEN THOSE WHO DO NOT DESERVE GOD’S LOVE ARE GOING TO BE INCLUDED IN THE FINAL CELEBRATION!** It doesn’t seem right and I’m glad I don’t have to decide where that line is ultimately drawn. But the witness of scripture consistently warns us against attempting to limit the sovereign grace of God, whose very name is LOVE.

In a Landmark book entitled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington, Chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, describes how world power is taking shape after the fall of the Soviet Union: “In the post-Cold War world, the most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political or economic. They are cultural. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: **WHO ARE WE?** And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most to them ... ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations and, at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not only to advance their interests but also to define their identity. We know who we are only when we know who we are not and often only when we know whom we are against.” (p. 21)

On the threshold of the **EIGHTH YEAR** of the 21st Century, all of Western Civilization is faced with a host of challenges, not the least of which is the challenge of **IDENTITY**. Who are we? And what values or commitments will shape the rest of this century?

- * Will we attempt to use religion to support our attempts to dominate other nations and cultures?
- * Or will we **KNEEL BEFORE THE LORD OF ALL HISTORY**, whose way is a way of **BLESSING**, a way of **PEACE**?
- * Will we shrink God down to the size of our expectations? Or will we yield ourselves and give ourselves to the Great Adventure of following Jesus of Nazareth across the boundaries of culture, class and race ... and even of religious certainty ... to take our place in the unending story of God’s redemption?

Who has ears to hear and eyes to see, come to the light of God, that shone in the back streets of Bethlehem so long ago and still shines brightly wherever men and women of every race and tribe and nation of the earth look to the one who said, “I am the light of the world.”

The message of Epiphany is that the circle of God’s mercy is drawn so generously that even you and I are included! And when we partake together - and remember - we discover that we are now partners with God in drawing others into the circle. What higher privilege ... what greater **JOY** can the human heart contain?