

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Hebrews 1:1-4 (NRSV)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

*It's Christmas! And Christmas is for everyone.
A babe is born. Jesus is our Savior. Alleluia!*

The Christmas story told by Luke and Matthew is a Jewish story through and through – until Matthew comes to the story of the magi, the wise men, the star-trackers from the east. Their arrival is marked on the Christian calendar by the Feast of Epiphany, which is celebrated twelve days after Christmas, on January 6.

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, meaning “manifestation” as in making someone or something readily apparent to the mind and the senses. Thus, Epiphany marks Jesus’ unveiling for the entire world, for the magi are Gentiles. In the Christmas story, it is the magi who make it clear that the baby Jesus will not grow up merely to be the Jewish Messiah, but to be the savior of all humankind. Now, the world can see just who was born to Mary of Nazareth.

A long and difficult journey

The magi are star-watchers from the east, probably the lands of what was once Babylonia. Israel lies on the western side of the Jordan River which sits in a great rift valley. On the eastern side of the river, sits the Arabian desert. Thus, getting from Babylonia to Bethlehem necessitated going north along the Tigris and Euphrates and then southwestward through Syria into Galilee and then south to Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In all, the journey from Babylon to Jerusalem was more than a thousand miles. At times the magi and their retinue would have traveled through areas plagued with bandits. At other times, they would have passed through sparsely populated lands that offered little to eat or to drink. It would have been so much easier for them simply to stay home and wait for someone else to bring them whatever good news there might be. After all, they were men of great learning, prestige,

and power. But despite the difficulties and uncertainties of the long journey, they chose not to stay, but to go.

An uncertain destination

Not only did the magi know that the journey would be long and difficult, they only had a vague idea where they were headed. Indeed, chances are that Bethlehem was a most unexpected destination. In Jesus' day, large communities of Jews still lived along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in what was once the center of the vast Babylonian empire. These Jews were the descendants of those who chose not to return to Jerusalem after the end of the exile in 538BC. The book of Esther is set in just such a post-exilic Jewish community in Persia (the successors to the Babylonians). Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that these three learned men were familiar with the great Hebrew Scroll of Isaiah.

Who were these "wise men?"

"Wise men" in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. It is why they are sometimes referred to as the "magi." But these *magoi* were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars.

Though they worked without telescopes, Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events. Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Whatever it actually was, these magi saw in the "star" a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born! – and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

Isaiah 60 speaks of a time when Jerusalem will be restored to greatness and wealth, when kings will come in procession, when other peoples will bring gifts of gold and silver, frankincense and myrrh. Not surprisingly then, the magi head for Jerusalem. What better place to find a new king than at the palace, the seat of power and wealth? Imagine the magi's surprise when a few of Herod's biblical scholars dug up the reference to Bethlehem as the place to find this new king. In terms of wealth and power, Bethlehem was dusty and inconsequential, worlds away from Herod and Jerusalem. Surely, the magi never expected to find the child in such a place. Yet, their surprise did not diminish their joy. Perhaps it even heightened their sense of awe and wonder. It was a world turned upside-down by the unexpected power of God. This same God turns our world upside down as well, if only we too will embrace the journey.

Our journey

The Christian journey is long and often difficult. It is long in that we are "right now" people and don't appreciate that the retraining of our souls takes time. It is difficult in that we often fail to grasp that the

retraining moves forward out not out of our successes but out of our sufferings, large and small. Though our destination is certain, we often see it only dimly and, sometimes, not at all. But we do not journey alone, for not only is God with us in each step, we are accompanied by countless Christians. But exactly who is it that we are getting to know on this journey?

An "exact imprint"

If you have a coin in your pocket, you might pull it out for a moment. The coin will help us understand better what the writer of Hebrews is trying to convey when he calls Jesus the "exact imprint of God's very being."

The Greek word translated "exact imprint" is *charaktér*, from which we get our word "character." It is a word that was born in the world of engraving, particularly in the production of coins. In Jesus' day, the emperor would employ an engraver to carve the emperor's portrait and a few words (such as "son of god") on a hard metal die or stamp. The engraver might carve a depiction of some notable event on another die. Then, the coin would be minted by placing a blank between the two dies and striking them with a large hammer. The resulting coin would be an exact impression of the original dies. The coin

would be the perfect expression of the original. We can see how the word *charaktér* came to mean not only letters in the alphabet but also a person's essential qualities.

So, what is the writer of Hebrews saying to us about Jesus? N.T. Wright puts it this way:

“It is as though the exact imprint of the father's very nature and glory has been precisely reproduced in the soft metal of the son's human nature. Now it is there for all the world to see. . . . Stay with the image of the emperor and his engraver a moment longer, and think about the opening two verses of this remarkable letter. Supposing the emperor had been wanting for a long time to tell his subjects who he was, to give them an idea of his character. And supposing the metal stamp, or die, hadn't been invented yet. The emperor would only be able to send out drawings or sketches, which might tell the people something but wouldn't give them the full picture. Then, at last, the reality: hard metal on soft, original picture exactly reproduced. Yes, says the writer: God had for a long time been sending advance sketches of himself to his people, but now he's given us his exact portrait.”¹

In plain sight

Christmas is Good News for everyone. Despite many people's denials, there is one true God and that baby in the manger, the Christ-child, is the perfect expression of that one true God. Indeed, that baby is more than a mere imprint, no matter how exact. The baby is God himself, not all of God, but fully and completely God.

We struggle to find words that can make any sense of this. Of course we do. The writer of Hebrews struggles. Paul struggles. We are trying to describe, to talk about, the infinite and holy God. But regardless of what words we choose to express this glorious mystery,² we do know what it means. It means that God brought human history to a climax in the birth, life, and death of Jesus. The world could never be the same. And it never has been the same.

A public event

There is a lot of pressure these days to make Christmas a private celebration, as if it matters only for Christians. But Christmas is a public event, the most public event ever. When John sees Jesus coming to the Jordan River, he exclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). That is as public as it comes. It is through Jesus that the world is reconciled to God whether the world knows it or not.

Much of the world doesn't know it, so we have a story we must tell. A public story. Everyone's story. A story about a God, the one true God, who took upon himself our own messy humanity so that we might live in a right and a loving relationship with him. Every Christmas we celebrate this story. Like the angels to the shepherds we want to proclaim to people everywhere that Jesus is Lord. That our God, their Creator, has given us a gift we could never measure. Sometimes in our desire to tell this story, we forget Peter's teaching: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15). It is the gentle and respectful part that can be so hard for us.

When I was a boy, all this was pretty easy. Maybe too easy. Too easy to take for granted. Everyone I knew was a Christian, or at least that is how they would have described themselves. I think there might have been one Jewish boy in Cub Scouts. But just a few decades later, I live side-by-side with people of other religions, nationalities, and races. Learning to live in a pluralistic world has not been easy for many of us. Must we rename a Christmas tree a Holiday tree? Must we withdraw Christmas from the public arena entirely? The challenge to Christians in our society is to learn how to be gentle and respectful with those who deny that Jesus is Lord, yet never surrender our claim that he is just that. How are we to be the light to the world? How are we to invite others into God's family? How are we to live out Christmas?

¹from N.T. Wright's “. . . for everyone” commentary on Hebrews.

²I'm sure that as Paul and other early Christians tried to write a theology of God, they came to appreciate why God chose to reveal himself in his actions, in stories and parables. Narrative retains the mystery in a way that descriptive logical language never could.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Isaiah 40:1-11 The Redeemer comes. Shout the Good News!	Tuesday, Isaiah 61 Proclaim Good News to the poor and freedom for the captives!
Wednesday, Micah 4:1-5 The nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord.	Thursday, Micah 6:6-8 The magi bring gifts, but exactly what does God desire from us?
Friday, 1 Peter 3:8-22 Be ready to make a defense of our hope.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on December 30

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on December 31

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

The Battle for Christmas:

The Real Story of Christmas in America

This class will not meet on Dec 29

Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Sermon Notes
