

# WISE GUYS

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## Magical (Part 1) | Matthew 1:18-2:1

[Read Matthew 1:18-2:1 Aloud]

We begin today the season of ADVENT, a term drawn from the Latin word "Adventus" which means "coming." We're in the season of the year when Christians across the planet look back at the coming of God's glory into human flesh at Bethlehem and also look forward to his final coming when the mess and madness of our world give way to lasting peace and joy.

Today, I invite you to stand up in respect for the wonder of this good news and read aloud with me some verses from the start of the Gospel According to Matthew. I'll read the italicized text and you'll read the bold-faced text. Let's both hear for ourselves and proclaim to others the Word of God...

*1:18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit.* **19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.** *20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.* **21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."**

*22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet:* **23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").** *24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.* **25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.** Thank you. Feel free to take your seat.

Now, is there anyone here for whom this is your first Christmas? Didn't think so. You don't have to be super religious to have heard this story before and know it pretty well. Chances are, you've heard a lot about Mary and Joseph. You are familiar with the Angel and the Baby Jesus. You know this story so well that you might be wondering where the Shepherds are. Sorry, they are airing over on GAL -- the Gospel According to Luke channel. But the fact that you might think of them is evidence that you've heard the Christmas story told a certain way through the years -- maybe to the point where you may think there's really nothing NEW here for me.

I can think of other stories where that is the case. I remember some friends inviting Amy and me to go with them to a musical about the Wizard of Oz and thinking, privately: "Wow. *That old story? How exciting (not).*" But then I got to the theater and heard the story not from the perspective of Dorothy or the Tin Man as usual but from the point of view of a lesser-known player – the WICKED witch from the West. It opened up the story of Oz for me in a remarkable new way.

Some of you may have had a similar experience with the tale of the American Revolution. When you were in school, you heard a lot about that time in history from the vantage point of people like Paul Revere and Thomas Jefferson and Betsy Ross. Frankly, that history had gotten a little tired for you. And then Manuel Lin Miranda helped you consider the same events from the viewpoint of that ostensibly bad guy who shot Aaron Burr. What was his name? Oh, yeah: HAMILTON, And, suddenly, history became real and relevant in a fresh new way.

In a similar vein, we're going to take a shot this year at telling the familiar story of Christmas from a different vantage point than normal. We're calling it: MAGICAL. Trust me: We're not going to forget Mary and Joseph and Jesus but we're going to consider them from the perspective of some of the lesser-known characters on the edge of the tale – the ones we meet when we turn the page of Matthew's gospel to chapter two. The text reads: ***After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.*** What do you know about these characters and what they tell us about the meaning of the Christmas story?

Maybe it's appropriate to start with what we DON'T KNOW about these people. Due to the fertile imagination of artists, song-writers and storytellers, a lot of beliefs and perceptions have built up around these characters over the centuries. But here's the truth: Despite the famous carol, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, the Bible doesn't tell us how many of them there were, just that they brought three gifts. Scripture doesn't reveal whether they had any royal blood in them at all. Had that been true, it's likely they would have gotten a very different reception when they arrived in the court of King Herod. Despite the familiar Christmas image of these people riding camels over the desert, Scripture doesn't give us a clue about how they travelled from their place of origin to Jerusalem or exactly what that place of origin was. The Bible only tells us that they came "**from the East.**" Through the millennia since they made that journey, pundits have pinned their origin to places as far apart as Ethiopia and India.

So, what DO we definitively know about these mysterious figures and, again, what does this tell us about the Christmas story that has relevance to our lives today? I'm so glad you asked! Let me start to provide some answers.

The term "Magi" is an ancient term from which we get our word "Magical" but it bears further definition. It's important to know that the term "magi" (or "magus" in the male singular form and "maga" in the feminine singular – no political association implied) was

used to describe a broad category of people. At one end of that category would be people close to what we might call SORCERERS today. I'm talking about dishonest tricksters, would-be wizards, and dabblers in the occult – not the people you're seeing on *America's Got Talent* or hiring for your kid's birthday party. I'm talking about people seriously trying to harness what J.K. Rowling would call "the Dark Arts." In other words, people interested in evil power for selfish purposes. You may recall reading in Exodus 22 that God takes a very uncharitable view of sorcery or its cousin, witchcraft.

At the same time, the Bible holds out hope that even sorcerers can come to understand and serve God, the Source of good power used for selfless purposes. In the New Testament Book of Acts chapter 8, we read a favorable story about a sorcerer named Simon. In this story Simon, a sorcerer from Samaria (try saying that three times fast!) comes under the influence of the Apostle Phillip and surrenders himself to Christ's service, at least momentarily. I'll tell you the rest of his story in Part 3 of this series. The Big Idea is that when you hear "Magi" you need to ask, "Which kind?"

You see, at the other end of the CONTINUUM from Sorcerers were "magi" who would be much closer to what we today would call SCHOLARS or even "wise men." The going theory among learned students of the Bible and history today is that the people who we meet arriving in Jerusalem in Matthew chapter 2 are Magi of this kind.

The ancient Greek historian, Herodotus, whose work I studied extensively at Yale, records the conviction that the Magi were priestly scholars who came from "the land of the Medes." The phrase, "land of the Medes" referred to a large territory east of Jerusalem that was home to the Medo-Persian empire, a territory that encompassed Persia (modern day Iran) and Babylon (modern day Iraq) and whose major religion back in the first century was a theology called "Zoroastrianism" – not to be confused with Zorro, the masked crusader who cuts a "Z" in things with his sword!

I think it's a pretty good theory. I think "the Magi" we meet in the Christmas story – the ones who give us a handle on what Christmas means we might miss without them – are probably priestly scholars of the Zoroastrian religion. Why do I say that? Well, unlike most other religions of that time, the Zoroastrians believed that there was only one God and that his ways could be discerned through three disciplines – the study of the natural world (for example, astrological movements), research on historical patterns, and understanding of common elements of religious teachings from many traditions.

The Zoroastrian scholars were known for amassing enough wisdom in this pursuit that kings of the ancient world frequently sought their counsel on important matters of religion, science, and law. In fact, our word "magistrate" (a term referring to somebody who figures things out and establishes practical responses to the conditions) comes from the word "magi."

We know from the Old Testament book of Daniel, for example, that a group of Magi frequently advised the famous Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, and his successors. It may well have been during Daniel's long tenure that the Magi of that eastern court became increasingly curious about the one God the Jews believed in. It's entirely plausible, if not likely, that they would have become curious about the prophecies that this God was planning to do something dramatic for the whole world by sending a Messiah – someone who would be a King above all Kings. And so, like the Jews, some of the Magi began waiting too.

I will observe, as an aside, that this is what the people of our world wait for still. The conflicts and confusions of our time arise in no small part from the fact that we lack a trustworthy, singular sovereign. There are billions of shrill voices, a million purported authorities, crowns and creditors and craven people all vying for our attention and allegiance. But if there was one exceptionally brilliant, unquestionably benevolent Being before whom we could all happily bow, this world could be better.

It seems likely that the Medo-Persian magi passed on from generation to generation the Jewish prophecies that such a Sovereign would come and they should be ready for it. As scholars who studied both the science in the skies and the wisdom of other religious traditions, they would have been interested in what the Hebrew tradition said about God's plan for the future. There was a prophecy from the Book of Numbers that said **"a star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel"** (Numbers 24:17). There was Micah's prophecy that **"you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah... out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel"** (Micah 5:2). There was Isaiah's prediction that a **"virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel"** [which means 'God with us'] (Isaiah 7:14). There was the further promise that the **"people living in darkness shall see a great light"** (Isaiah 9:2).

And so the anticipation mounted for these scholars from the east. They kept scanning the skies and the news for signs that the time had fully come (Galatians 4:4). It must have been a clear night in Babylon or Persia when it finally happened. The Magi gazed into the western sky and were shocked to see there what appeared to be a very bright and unusual star. More on that next week.

Could it have finally occurred, they would have wondered? Could the perfect ruler this world needs have truly come? Could the One universal God have manifested himself in some very particular way – maybe even in the form of a specific human child, born to a virgin, like the prophecies said? Could the light our darkened world needs to see have truly come to fill the world with transforming love?

The Magi had to see. So they got out of their chairs. They cleared their calendars. They packed up their goods. They said see you later to their families. They saddled up and headed west toward Jerusalem.

As you prepare to make your own journey from here, let me ask you some personal questions: Where and to whom do you look for the wisdom you need and that our world needs today? In other words, who are your magi? How confident are you that the voices you are listening to are truly trustworthy – that they are brilliant and benevolent and out for everyone’s thriving instead of mainly their own? What do you need to do to shut off the useless ones? Finally, who and what are you looking for and what steps are you taking to go in pursuit of that?

If I know one thing after all these years of life it is that our journey’s need to become more intentional – to exercise some practical wisdom. If we aim at nothing, we will hit it. If we aim at something, we can reach it. In our spiritual life, social life, family life, or vocational life, each of us needs to decide who we are looking for, what we want to become, and what we’re willing to give to reach that destination. Like the magi, it’s time for you and for me to head west toward Jerusalem.