

First Presbyterian Church
Matthew 2:1-12, “Drawing All Things To Jesus”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/5/2025

We begin the New Year – and the second quarter of the 21st Century –
with a very well-known story.

The story of the Magi is one that has become quaint to us
because of the songs we sing about it.

And we just sang the most famous one,
which will be on repeat in your head
for the rest of the week.

“We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar...”

I hope it’s okay if I point out that this blessed old carol
has a great message, but also takes some...artistic liberties.

To begin with, we are never told in the Bible the number of
those who come from the east, only the number of gifts.

And we are not told that they were kings, but rather Magi.

The song and its melody have become so familiar to us
that it dominates our imagination when we read Matthew 2,
and if we aren’t careful,
we might stop paying attention to the story itself.

This is a story only found in the book of Matthew.

Have you ever wondered why this gospel writer
included a story that none of the other Gospel writers
knew about or if they did, cared to incorporate?

I suggest that Matthew tells this story so that we would know one thing:
The Triune God of the Universe is drawing all things to Jesus,
BUT – the path is not straight.

Our world is pulling us apart – politically, communally, geographically,
and even gravitationally. But! In a world that is
pulling all things apart, the Triune God of the Universe
is drawing all things to Jesus.

Being drawn toward Jesus *sounds* straightforward, and yet,
for anyone who has found themselves drawn toward Jesus,
it must also be said that ... the path is not straight.
The path we walk by faith toward Jesus is not straight.

By which I mean, we often have our expectations upset,
and we often have obstacles we don't know how to deal with,
and we often are drawn to Jesus in ways and in times
that are counterintuitive.

We read in Matthew chapter 2 that
the baby Jesus who would one day be known as the King of the Jews
was born in Bethlehem in Judea.
Herod the Great is named as the *official* King of Israel,
and we know from other historical sources that
he would die within a few years,
sometime between 1 and 4 BC.
His son would take the throne with the name Herod Antipas.

Here's why that is important: If Herod the Great was King of Israel
when Jesus had already been born,
and Herod the Great died before the year 0 AD
(the supposed year of Jesus' birth)
then someone must have set our
year Zero just a few years too late.

While even our Western calendar was oriented around the birth of Jesus,
the path is not straight.

The main characters in this passage are the Magi.
The word "Magi" can refer to a Magician, or a "wise man"
but it can also refer to people in the first century
who looked to the stars to receive messages
about what happened on the earth.

The Magi were the highest level of what we call "astrologers."

It's easy to get astrology confused with astronomy,
but a little reflection on these compound words
makes the difference between them clear.

“Astro” begins both words, and we know that “astro” refers to the stars.
The word “Nomos” means “law,” so astronomy (astro-nomos)
is the study of the laws that guide the movement of the stars.

The word “logos” means “word” or “message,” so astrology (astro-logos),
is reading the *messages* the stars’ movements reveal.

Ancient astrologers were incredibly knowledgeable and observant
of the patterns and movements of heavenly bodies.
They interpreted these movements as
a revelation of divine mystery.

Traditionally, there are two ways of thinking about the Magi.

The first way is to see them as royal, wealthy,
and benevolent figures who come to find the Christ child as a result of
their wisdom and cooperation with God’s leading.

The second way is to see them as pagan Magicians
who are against God because they teach
those who follow them to worship created things
such as the stars and the moon
rather than the Creator of all things.

So, are the Magi sincere spiritual seekers who are
basically looking for the one true God?
Or are they dangerous eastern mystics
who have been taken captive by
idolatrous superstition and astrology?

Does it really matter?

Either way you look at it, whoever they are,
God has invited them to the party,
and has drawn *them* to worship his Son.

If we take that same logic to our own life situations,
it doesn't matter if our neighbor appears to be
sincerely seeking God in Christ or if they are seeking God in other
forms or traditions —
God can call to them in their own context to draw them
near to Jesus.

I frequently talk to people who are worried about
younger generations of people not coming to church.
Generation after generation we see lower and lower
Sunday worship attendance.
Which is concerning if we think Jesus is primarily encountered
in a church building on a Sunday morning.
But what if God is drawing them toward Jesus by another path?
What if they are noticing signs and patterns that others ignore
– signs that reveal the inbreaking of God's reign of love?
Signs that point to the fruit of the Spirit?
Rather than sitting in judgment of people who don't come to church,
what if we asked some questions
about where their hearts are being drawn?
I'm not saying that these generations aren't being distracted
by worldly things – that is also happening.
But I also think there could be more happening
than what we see on the surface.

In ancient Israel's imagination, the East was modern day
Iraq or Iran – places where things hostile to God's people
emerge from.

We know this East versus West tension even today.
It's the way the world works: things get pulled apart.

But while the world was pulling East from West,
God was drawing all things to Jesus.
Isn't that amazing?

Listen to what Dale Bruner has to say about this,
**“The divine invitation of *astrologers* to the *Messiah's*
coming out party indicates the wide *mercy* Matthew
had already found in his OT genealogical studies.**

**The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is *for* all people...
the Gospel that ends with the Great Commission
to the nations begins with an invitation *of* the nations.”**

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For another beginning and end connection in Matthew, consider this:

The Magi arrive in Jerusalem after their long journey and ask
King Herod with genuine interest and curiosity
for the location of the one who has been born as
“The King of the Jews.”

The only other Bible characters who call Jesus “the King of the Jews”
are the Roman soldiers of Pontius Pilate who crucify Jesus
while mocking and taunting him
at the end of Matthew’s gospel.

This means that at the beginning and at the end of the book of Matthew,
Jesus is identified as the King of the Jews,
but only by people who are *not* Jews themselves!
God is drawing all nations to Jesus,
but the path is not straight.

This awakens us to an astonishing reality—
the inclusion of all nations isn’t a side-bar to what God is doing,
it’s the beginning and end of what God is doing
because God loves all people and his character
is revealed to the world when the nations
are drawn together to worship him.

God is drawing all things – even the stars and planets! – to Jesus.
God has spoken to these eastern people, ancient Iraqis or Iranians,
through the very thing that separated
them from the Jewish people.

Jesus was revealed to them through their own eastern religion.
And now God has authenticated that message
by aligning the universe to announce the birth of Jesus.

When the Magi arrive at Jesus' house, they bow down and worship him.
And they give him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold we consider precious even today,
but what was with the Frankincense and Myrrh?

Historians tell us that in the first century,
gold would have been considered *the least* valuable of the three gifts.
Frankincense and Myrrh were worth several times
their own weight in gold.

These were gifts one would only bring to a person of the highest magnitude.

When the Magi are ready to leave,
they are told in a dream that Herod was up to no good.
He was using their genuine curiosity to serve his own
power and purposes.
So they return back to their countries by another route.
(The path home *after* being drawn to Jesus is also not straight.)

As these magi return back to their home cultures, the star they saw,
and their interpretation of it, told them something true.
Could the child they worshiped have offered them
a new vision for their own countries?
Their own cultures?

I would think so. But at the same time, were all their questions answered?
Were they free from danger? No.
Did they have yet more to seek out? Yes.

How about us? We may have been drawn to Jesus decades ago.
But how do we draw near to Jesus in 2025...
and how are we changed by what we see?

If you feel the tug of the Spirit already in your life,
then follow in that way – even if it seems a little surprising.
And if you feel that the world is conspiring against your faith,
that nothing is easy, that all your plans are falling apart,
remember that God's ways are counterintuitive.

This year, my "resolution" is to not seek the straight path
of own expectations, the way of control, the way of power.
Instead, I hope to be drawn by the Spirit to a fresh encounter with Christ
knowing that the road I walk with God will always have new surprises.