



First Star Trek

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Matthew 2:1-12

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Stars fascinate me. They always have. Most of my knowledge of the stars is self-taught, although I did take Astronomy 101 my first year of college. My fascination with stars began in childhood. I grew up in the country, away from the glare of city lights. On a cloudless night, the sky was crammed full of stars, more than I could count.

During September, the most visible star in our night sky is called Fomalhaut. It's a relatively young star, as stars go, dating back a few hundred million years. It's also one of the closest stars, only 25 light years from earth. Twenty-five light years may not sound like much. A light year is the distance light travels in a year. Light travels nearly six trillion miles in a year. Multiply six trillion by 25 and you have some appreciation for the vastness of space. Our universe is so big and we are so small. The assertion in Scripture that the Creator of this universe loves and cares for us is astounding.

Tonight's moon will be crescent-shaped. It will hang in the sky, just above the planet Venus. September is a planet-gazing extravaganza for star-watchers. Five different planets in our solar system will be visible at various times this month: Mars, Mercury, Neptune, Saturn, and Venus.

In Matthew's gospel, magi (sometimes called wise men) are people who study the stars. They also derive messages from the stars. Magi are astronomers and astrologers rolled into one.

These magi see a new star streaking across the night sky. A shooting star was believed to herald the birth of a new world leader. They follow the star, all the way to Jerusalem.

Since they travel from the east, likely Persia or Babylonia, it takes them several months to complete the journey.

Some of you are Star Trek fans, or “Trekkies.” The original *Star Trek* television series debuted in 1966. While it lasted only three years, it has spawned seven television sequels and thirteen feature films over the years. Two more *Star Trek* TV sequels are in the works. Matthew’s story could be called the First Star Trek. The magi in our story are on a voyage to a distant land, “to go where no man has gone before.”

If we are going to talk about these magi, we need to clear up three myths that have grown up around them.

First, these magi never make it to the manger. Our crèche sets have this part of the story all wrong. Matthew’s gospel reports the star leads them to the house where Jesus and his parents are residing (Matthew 2:11).

Second, there is no Biblical record of three magi. The number three is likely derived from the triple gifts they give to Jesus and his parents.

Third, they are not named Melchior, Casper, and Balthasar. The names originate in the sixth century and never appear in Scripture.

This story receives top billing two Sundays after Christmas. Yet it always seems to get lost in the afterglow of Christmas. Today, I want to do it justice.

These magi follow the star to Jerusalem, headquarters of King Herod. There are actually six “Herods” in the Bible.

This one is Herod the Great. He may be a great builder, but we would scarcely call him a great man. Herod is a tyrant, paranoid of any rivals to his throne. We witness this in the murder of his favorite wife and two sons.

Herod's paranoia shifts into overdrive at the news of a newborn king. Magi tell anyone who will listen, "Where is the one who is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2).

Herod must be thinking, "Now, wait a minute here. I'm king of the Jews. What's all this talk about another king of the Jews? We'll just see about that."

Herod calls together all of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, the chief priests and teachers of the law. He asks them where this Messiah King will be born. The religious leaders cite the ancient prophecy of Micah. The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. "For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel" (Matthew 2:6).

Herod summons the magi to his palace for a little secret meeting. Beware of secret meetings! Herod tells the magi, "Go and search diligently for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (Matthew 2:8). Liar, liar, pants on fire.

The magi leave Jerusalem and follow the star to Bethlehem, a distance of only six miles. The star stops at the house where Jesus and family are lodging. They fall down and worship. They lavish on this holy family extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Today's story closes with the magi being warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Instead, they go another way. *Way* is a word rich with theological overtones, given that later Jesus describes himself as "the way" (John 14:6).

There are two sets of contrasts in this story. One between Herod and the magi; the other between Herod and Jesus.

First contrast between Herod and the magi: Herod is clearly the insider in this story. He's got it all going on. In the words of one commentator, "Herod is racially Arab, culturally Greek, religiously Jewish, and politically Roman."

The magi are outsiders—Gentiles, heathens, pagans. Yet, who are the ones who first worship the Messiah and bring him gifts? Outsider magi! The king of the Jews acts like an infidel while these heathen magi assume the posture of true believers. The faith of these magi presents a striking contrast to Herod's unfaith.

The religious leaders (insiders) in our story ought to know better. They know the right answer to Herod's question about where the Messiah will be born, yet fail to do anything about it. While he is born in their own backyard, they miss it entirely. They make no effort to investigate the report that this newborn baby might be the long-awaited Messiah. Not even the visit of these magi piques their curiosity to travel the requisite six miles to Bethlehem to check it out. Those we least expect worship Jesus do so. Those we most expect to welcome him ignore him.

The irony is unmistakable. Outsiders go and worship. Insiders stay home. Outsiders bring gifts. Insiders give

nothing. Outsiders take the journey. Insiders stay put. Time and again in the Bible, insiders miss it and outsiders get it.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? When it comes to outsiders and insiders, most of us qualify as insiders. We go to church. We give our time and money. We can check most of the boxes. Yet when it comes to following Jesus, I mean, really following him, we offer excuses and check out.

Maybe you feel like an outsider. You grew up outside of the church and far away from God. Let these magi serve as encouragement for you. No matter how far we feel from God, we are never beyond the reach of God's mercy and gracious pardon.

Let's move to the second contrast between Herod and Jesus. There are two kings in this story. At the outset of the chapter, Herod is clearly the king in charge. He does all the talking. He wields all the power. He's the one who makes things happen. Yet only a few verses after our story, in verse 19, Herod is dead and gone while Jesus is just getting started.

I find it curious that Matthew only identifies Jesus by name once throughout this entire second chapter. I count nine times where he is simply called "the child." Matthew seems to go out of his way to remind his readers that this child is born the same way all people are born. The so-called "apocryphal gospels" fashion Jesus into a type of wonder boy who makes profound statements and performs stupendous miracles. There is none of that here. He is simply a baby. He says nothing and does nothing. Everything must be done for him and to him.

The first chapter of Matthew serves as a marked contrast to the second chapter. The first chapter is all about Jesus' divinity. Jesus is called the Messiah at the beginning and end of the genealogy that introduces the gospel. He is born in a way no one else is born, without benefit of a human father (Matthew 1:18). He is called Jesus, a name that originally means "God saves" (Matthew 1:21). He is given the moniker Immanuel from the prophet Isaiah, meaning "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

While the first chapter of Matthew's gospel underscores Jesus' divinity, the second chapter accentuates his humanity. Why am I telling you this? In the span of two chapters, Matthew has introduced Jesus to us as both fully divine and fully human. Because he is human, he is able to identify with us and show empathy for our human frailty. Because he is divine, he is able to save us and draw us into union with God.

Our theme this fall is Kingdom Living. There are two kingdoms that rival each other at the outset of Matthew's gospel: the kingdom of God, inaugurated in Jesus, and the kingdom of this world, represented by Herod. Herod's kingdom is all about power and control. Jesus' kingdom is all about loving and serving God. Love the Lord and love the people. Serve the Lord and serve the people.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? We are in the midst of a hotly contested presidential election. This election is important. We urge you to participate in this democratic process and vote your conscience. That said, kings like Herod come and go. Jesus' kingdom lasts forever. Our allegiance, first and foremost, is to him. Serve him. Follow him.