

'MAGI-CAL DREAM'

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory— this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, "Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We're on pilgrimage to worship him."

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

They told him, "Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

*It's you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel."*

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, "Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I'll join you at once in your worship."

Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Call me Matthew. That's my pen name, not my real name. In the time and place where I live, it is not safe to write under my real name. You may never know my true identity, but the angels assure me that you will come to know my name and my stories as if they were your very own.

I write many decades after the events of Jesus' day. I never knew him personally. Some people think I walked with him as his disciple, but alas, that was only in my dreams, not in my reality. Like Jesus, I am a Jewish man and I am well-versed in the scriptures of my people. I am convinced that Jesus was the long-awaited, promised Messiah talked of as far back as the days of the prophet, Isaiah. I am convinced that Jesus was the Messiah sent to our people by God, and I seek to convince my readers of that belief as well.

I wrote once of strange men, scholars from another land. Magi, we called them, literally magicians or sorcerers, men whose ways and gifts were foreign to our own. In my story these wise men were summoned to Jerusalem from far away, summoned and directed by a bright star in the sky that led them to find the new king of Judea, a baby. This story appears in no other Gospel; it is my sole creation.

So why did I write it? Perhaps it was a dream that came to me as I slept, and I wrote it to underscore the universal majesty of the birth of the baby Jesus. The Jewish people did not take particular note of the event; then again, they lived in oppressive times and this birth to these unpedigreed parents was not worthy of reporting. To them it was nothing special. Just another poor child born to poor parents in a meager stable among farm animals.

My Gospel-writing Brother Luke tried to relate this event to the common folk. He writes of shepherds and angels and fantastic light shows in the sky. But even his account is land and time-locked. If lowly shepherds were treated to a display of angels and this special baby's birth, they did not broadcast it anywhere. It was their private treat. Afterwards, they went about their business I suppose as if it had never happened.

Why would the Jews care about shepherds who might or might not even know God? Why would they care about my wise men of foreign beliefs and traditions, peculiar travelers who lavished precious gifts upon this child while still following their own religions? These are puzzling questions. I have no answers for the dream that came to me. I just wrote down what I experienced.

Gold, frankincense, myrrh. Impractical gifts to be sure. A gift of gold would be suspect and likely to be confiscated by the Romans or the Temple Treasurers. A gift that would be life-changing for the entire

family to be sure, there is every indication that Jesus was born poor, raised in austere circumstances, and never had any personal wealth of his own. Perhaps I was toying with you; this "gold" may have been intended by me to be merely symbolic, signaling that even learned and respected men from other regions and religions were prepared to pay homage to the newborn king.

Frankincense and myrrh were both made from tree sap and used as medicinal and sacred fragrances and resins. They might symbolize in my story that Jesus was to be a healing balm for the world. Myrrh was often used in embalming bodies. Could its presence in the story be a foreshadowing of Jesus' eventual fate? I will leave it to you to reach your own conclusions.

It is no accident, however, that gift-giving is at the heart of the Magi story. What I mean to say is that Jesus was himself a gift given by God to the world. His entire ministry is characterized by his giving of himself—to the poor, to the despondent, to the undocumented, to the widow. He said, "It is better to give than to receive." It is also said that the kingdom of God constantly proclaimed by him was "characterized by an abundant, gracious, extravagant economy of grace, of generosity, of gift giving." (B. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*)

The Messiah's gift-offerings were free, but those with power and influence by-and-large rejected them. The Jewish religious aristocracy refused his generosity of spirit. As you today might not understand the

context of the Magi in ancient times, they did not understand at all the gift that was Jesus. They were threatened; they were suspicious; they acted swiftly and decisively against them so as to protect their power and position, to safeguard their personal wealth and to curry favor with the occupying Romans.

In my story, the Magi act just as decisively to save the life of the Christ child. Although King Herod commanded the wise men to tell him the whereabouts of the baby, they were warned off returning to his palace and they returned to their homeland by a different route. Herod meant to kill the child and eliminate thereby this perceived threat.

Joseph, too, was warned away from Herod's reach. While the King was busy having the infant baby boys in his kingdom killed, Joseph in a dream was told to take his young family and flee to Egypt. Jesus spent part of his childhood there as a refugee.

Now do you see my meaning? Members of other religions—the Magi from the east and the Egyptians to the south—help save Jesus' life. Could their role in my Christmas story be a gift to you today? Perhaps I am trying to tell you that God has a better way for people of difference to relate to one another. Instead of seeing people of other religions as enemies or competitors, perhaps you could be honoring other aspects of what they bring to your parlor table.

When considering other religions, Brian McLaren suggests these questions:

What good can be discovered in this religion? Let us honor it.

What treasures have they been given to share with us? Let us warmly welcome them.

What dangers do they face? Let us protect them.

What gifts do we have to share with them? Let us generously offer them.

As you study in your day the adventure of Jesus in his, I invite you to celebrate your location in the rich tradition of the ancients—with Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Ruth, Mary and Joseph, Mary Magdalene, the disciples, and the countless, nameless persons individually affected by the living Messiah of the Jewish faith. I invite you to claim your history and identity. It is worthy of preserving and sharing.

To be alive in adventure of Jesus is also to observe and value others who intersect with our story from their own location, religion, and unique tradition, for they have their own history, identity, and gifts. McLaren proclaims the following truth to our mutual generations: "...we don't have to see people of other religions in terms of *us vs. them*. We can see people of other religions as beloved neighbors, *us with them*, *them with us*, with gifts to share."

Wouldn't my world have been a far better place if we could have learned to accept the gifts brought to us by people who differed from us in our beliefs and practices? Wouldn't your world benefit from the same epiphany, the same awareness?

"May we who follow Jesus discover the gifts of our tradition and share them generously, and may we joyfully receive the gifts that others bring as well. For every good gift and every perfect gift comes from God."

May it be so.