

Wondering about the Wise Men

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 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." Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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." When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:1-12

Sometimes, I wonder about the star – the one that the wise men saw at its rising, the one they took as a sign that a king had been born to the Jews. I again wondered about that star a few weeks ago. I had read that Jupiter and Saturn, the two largest planets in our solar system, would appear to merge in the early evening sky on December 21, the winter solstice.

Some people who want to account for the Star of Bethlehem in terms of astronomy believe that the wise men saw and followed this same bright joining of Jupiter and Saturn, a very rare occurrence. Prior to a few weeks ago, the last time this conjunction shone so brightly was March 4, in the Year of our Lord 1226, nearly 800 years ago.

Whatever celestial light the magi followed, I wonder how many people knew about it. Of those who knew, how many took time to see it and wonder about it? How many who saw it believed it to be a sign? Even if many did believe it to be a sign, all but a few seem to have left it at that. They stayed home.

In retrospect, I'm now surprised and disappointed that I wasn't more curious about the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn back in December. I couldn't even tell you what the weather was like that night. I assure you, though, that my plans never included stargazing.

My indifference makes me wonder if or how often I may miss God-given signs. Do I miss them because I don't look for them? Or because I don't know how to look for them? Or is it indifference, self-absorption. Why do I need a sign from God when I have my smartphone? I wonder: if I did see a sign and if I did know what it meant, would I be willing in response to undertake a long, hard journey, knowing it could cost me and take me far, far out of my comfort zone? I wonder.

We heard in the gospel that *When [the wise men] saw that the star had stopped ... over the place where the child was ... they were overwhelmed with joy.* I myself felt joy and laughed out loud when I looked up the original Greek text here. Four separate words are used to convey just how joyful they were. I'm drawn to the translation that says *they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.* They were over the top with joy!

I wonder why the magi rejoiced with exceeding great joy. Maybe they were mainly just glad to have arrived, like marathon runners crossing the finish line. The journey had had more twists and turns, more squabbles and uncertainty, and taken longer than they'd ever calculated back when it began. Surely they were relieved to have arrived.

But that doesn't fully add up to *rejoicing with exceeding great joy*, does it? We are no doubt meant to see that their exceeding great joy arose from the newborn king, Christ Himself, and from the Holy Family as a whole.

I wonder if the joy they found is hinted at in a line from a poem, *The Vessel*, by CK Williams. He writes of being "*in a real relationship with God instead of just lonely for Him.*" I wonder if loneliness for God caused these magi to strike out on their journey. I wonder if what brought them such great joy was some inkling here, in this Christ child, of a real relationship with God.

Due to today's disturbing and violent events in our nation's capital, I considered editing the joy from this message. But let's remember that these wise men had just come from an audience with a conniving, frightened and violent ruler. Perhaps their joy also arose in part by way of contrast – as if a first breath of fresh air for someone who was about to drown. In contrast to defiant, violent chaos and self-preservation at all costs – true Peace with justice on earth.

Finally, I wonder why this fantastical story is only found in the Gospel of Matthew. Why did this author include it? Scholars point out that the story supports the main premise of this Gospel: The child born in Bethlehem and sought by these foreign magi was not only King of the Jews but Lord and Savior of all creation.

I wonder, though, if, in addition to building a theological argument, the author was wondering about you and me. I don't mean to suggest that he was thinking of us by name. He surely could not have conceived of worship-by-Zoom! But I wonder if the story is included partly to stir up wonder in us: wonder about the journey that will lead us to Christ, and, when we find him, there to rejoice with exceeding great joy. *Amen.*