

Scandal: The Wrong Guys
By Jason Huff
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Jeremiah 32:17-20; Ephesians 2:12-20; Matthew 2:1-12

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is from Matthew 2:1-12. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the insert from your bulletin to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."

I love the UPS guy. The Fed Ex guy too! When I was a kid, around December there was nothing better than seeing those guys driving around delivering packages. It meant somebody was getting something for Christmas...hopefully, me! I remember care packages at college. Even today, when I've ordered something for somebody else, when I get that package and I put it aside in a special hiding place, I get the thrill of thinking about their faces on Christmas morning. We have a friend who's a UPS guy and his family doesn't see him between December 1st and Christmas morning, so give those guys a "thanks" and a smile when you see 'em.

Then there are the wrong guys who show up at your door. Some are annoying but friendly, like Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. But I get nervous about the guys who go door-to-door selling security systems. That's just creepy to me. "Hello, I'm here to find out whether or not you have an alarm system in your house so I can either sell you one or come back tonight at my second job as a cat burglar." They make me feel bad that I'm not buying something from them and nervous that they know I'm on ADT's naughty list.

The story of the magi is weird because we're not sure who the right guys in the story are. The magi are part of the scandal of Christmas. So are King Herod, the religious leaders, even the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The magi help us understand that Jesus, the long-awaited messiah, is for everyone who would come to Him, even those the world would say are the wrong guys.

What are magi, anyway? That's a weird term, and it comes to us untranslated from the Greek. Most Bible translations give it to us straight because they want to be honest, and they don't know what to do with it. Despite what songs and translations have said, they aren't kings, and they aren't just wise men – they might be wise, but that's not what "magi" means.

The word only appears twice in the Greek version of the Old Testament, in the book of Daniel. The magi are the astrologers and dream interpreters in the royal courts of Babylon. During the exile of the Israelites into Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar has dreams that the magi can't interpret. Only Daniel can. He's a young Jewish man who is made into a chief executive in the Babylonian kingdom because God is with him and reveals the dreams to him. Because the word "magi" isn't used of anyone else in the Old Testament, it gives us a clue that these are astronomers who might be from Babylon. It's possible Daniel taught their ancestors about God and the Messiah who was to come, and that knowledge got passed down throughout the ages.

The historical link makes sense, and it explains why the magi were following a star. It also explains why the other meaning of the word "magi" – magicians or sorcerers – doesn't apply. They aren't astrologers like we think of them, doing fortune telling or dabbling in the occult to make money – that was expressly forbidden in Scripture. What these magi did was the precursor to astronomy. These guys searched the heavens for signs and clues as to what God was doing; they looked to the stars to help them understand the meaning and purpose of life and to know the wonder of God. God from time to time condescended to reveal a little bit of Himself to them that way. At the end of the day, though, we're still just piecing puzzle pieces together about these guys.

And they are most definitely not the guys anyone would expect to come in and inform Jerusalem about the Messiah. When these guys show up, it causes a huge stir. They look and sound really out of place, in a land that dislikes foreigners. They start making inquiries about the Messiah, and it disturbs Herod and all of Jerusalem. It just doesn't make sense.

The Jewish Messiah was supposed to lead the Jewish people into a Jewish kingdom under the Jewish God that would rule above all others. What are these guys from Babylon doing asking about the Messiah? Imagine if somebody just stepped off the plane from Pakistan and barely knew a word of English but could school you in all the finer points of American football. It'd be kinda embarrassing, right, that someone who didn't grow up here knew more than us about the quintessential America sport? (It wouldn't be hard for me, because I know next to nothing about football, but for a lot of people, it would be a huge ego crusher.)

Then Herod gets involved and the scandal grows. Herod wasn't actually a Jew. He bought the throne from Caesar. And he did what a lot of kings did when they wanted the love of grumpy people – he built them a lot of stuff. That's why he became known as Herod the Great, because he made the temple an amazing wonder, because he made tons of improvements to this tiny empire he'd purchased for himself. Having created this marvel, Herod goes a little nuts. He becomes paranoid that everybody's out to take over his kingdom. He has some of his children and even his beloved wife murdered because he was so obsessed. So this whole idea that a messiah has come who will restore Israel and take over as the true king? Freaks Herod out.

Herod's paranoid, but he's not dumb, so he goes to the experts on the messiah, the chief priests and teachers of the law. He asks them, where does Scripture say He's to be born? And they all quote Micah 5:2. He's to be born in Bethlehem. Just six miles away – a three-hour walk from Jerusalem. And they leave it at that. They don't show any further interest.

Now what's going on here? It could have been that they really didn't care. To them, this was just a piece of trivia that didn't matter to them personally. It's like asking a photographer what an aperture is or a teacher what a textbook is or a long-distance truck driver what the speed limit is. They've been waiting for the messiah so long, maybe He's more of a legend to them than someone they truly expect to come.

But they might also have been trying to save their own skin. Turns out Herod had murdered several religious leaders when they confronted him with something he didn't want to hear. The priests and teachers probably just wanted to be left alone. Did the Messiah come? That'd be great, but if it means having to deal with Herod, they'd rather not think about it.

So Herod finally meets with the magi in secret. Why in secret? Probably, because he was paranoid, he wanted to have full control over the situation. He sends them off to Bethlehem with instructions to report back. He thinks he's got everything under control. If they find nothing, no harm no foul. If they do, he can send a couple loyal soldiers on the sly to deal with the problem later so as not to attract attention. By all rights, he should be the one heading to greet the Messiah, but instead he sends these guys to do it.

So finally the magi get back on the road, and somehow this celestial sign shows them right to Jesus. They are amazed; the Greek says they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. You can't be any more joyful than the magi were! They arrive, they worship Jesus, they present their gifts. You couldn't have asked them to be more generous or thoughtful. And then they go on their way, heading back the long way, the harder and more dangerous way, rather than going through Jerusalem. They've been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod. It's no small thing that these men who have for generations interpreted the dreams of kings finally had a dream themselves that protects the infant king they worship.

When we look beyond the gift-wrapped version of the story we know, we see something deeper, more scandalous, and more rewarding. The key to the magi's story is that God will use anyone for His glory who is willing, even people who we'd think are the wrong ones for the job. It's almost impossible to believe that God would work in this way, through these magi. The Old Testament mentions stars, but it doesn't tell us to expect one as a sign of the Messiah. The Jewish people weren't looking for it. This was something God did outside of the Scripture and the prophets.

These people were not heirs to the promises of God. They are not the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They didn't know enough Scripture to know where the Messiah would be born. Astronomy was at best a questionable pursuit to the Jews. Why didn't God tell a prophet? Why didn't God raise up someone important? The shepherds, who aren't in Matthew's gospel, are among the lowest in society. The shepherds and these foreigners? Really?

But God decides to use these magi, and that's the great thing. He uses men who wouldn't have been swayed by all the messianic expectations of Jewish society. Can you imagine these guys giving these gifts worth tens of thousands of dollars to a family living in a tiny community, probably in a makeshift house? They know because of the star. They don't doubt because they don't expect a warrior prince. They follow the sign that God gives to them; that's enough for them. Had the chief priests and teachers of the law found Jesus, they probably would have laughed themselves silly. This baby, the messiah? Born to a poor family under strange circumstances? What God's chosen people wouldn't have been able to see, these strangers did, all by their trust in God.

Friends, the point is, if our desire is to know God in Jesus Christ, we can all be the right guys. There are no wrong guys in worship; there are no wrong gals in the church. Everyone belongs here. Every last person on earth was designed with the specific purpose of bringing glory to God. God isn't interested in all the external factors; He's not terribly concerned about our past mistakes, even. He wants us to worship Him.

That is fantastic news. It means there's room for all of us. Look at these guys...they aren't religious superstars. They weren't Jewish men and women privileged to greet the Messiah after years of faithful service because they were good people. In fact, they almost certainly worshiped other gods at some point in time – it was a part of their culture. They are from the wrong side of the spiritual tracks. So what? They want to honor God, and God lets them.

A lot of us in the church, even if we've been here for years, doubt that we belong. We've sinned, we've fallen away, we've done things we're ashamed of, and we still feel like we've got years of learning and making up for those past deeds before we figure God will use us. Our pasts still haunt us. Or we simply don't quite fit in and think that there's something wrong with us God can't use. We're the wrong shape or size or color. Our language is too colorful; we weren't born and raised in Michigan; we like sports (or hate them); we're too intellectual or too blue-collar. We're divorced; we're unmarried and we don't want to be; we're married but our marriage isn't everything it should be. We doubt God too often. We trust in Him too little. We don't pray enough and we read our Bible even less. We're failures at things that matter.

And it affects who we invite to church too. Will they think we're hypocrites if we don't have our act together? Will they be disappointed? Will they stop being my friend? Or do they fit who we see becoming a Christian? Do they fit what a godly person looks like? Because while we love the idea that God transforms people, we're not sure He's going to do it right in front of us to the person in the check-out line with a hundred tattoos or the neighbor with two little kids and weird piercings or whatever it is that freaks us out a little bit.

And God doesn't care about any of that. Anybody can come. He'll take astrologers from Babylon who didn't know a thing about Abraham or Moses or King David, who looked funny and talked funny but were willing to come greet His Son. As we learned a couple weeks ago, God let all sorts of unlikely people into Jesus' family line. He'll take you too, and your friends, and your family, and your weird co-worker and the guy that asks you for a buck waiting in line at McDonalds. We just have to come.

And that leads us to the question for us for the week: are we willing to come? Are we willing to reach out in faith and believe in this messiah born to us in Bethlehem? The reality is, the trip to Jesus is different for each one of us. The magi probably took over a year of their lives and virtually all their life savings to greet Him. It'd be easy to turn it around and ask ourselves, "Would I sacrifice that much for Him?" But I'm not sure that's the right question. Because the shepherds didn't have to travel a thousand miles or bring expensive gifts. They just had to walk an hour or two and bring themselves. God met them at the manger in the same way He met the magi. It's not necessarily the expense of the journey or the number of miles traveled that matters; it's that we meet Him, whatever that takes.

I often think of holiday specials around this time of year, and Charlie Brown is always the first to come to mind. But as I was thinking about the trip of the magi this week, **A Charlie Brown Christmas** wasn't the first thing that came to mind. Instead, I got a vision of **It's The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown**. The story revolves around Linus, who never goes trick-or-treating on Halloween. He always sits in a pumpkin patch waiting around for the infamous Great Pumpkin to show up. Sally has a crush on Linus and believes everything he says, so she goes with him to the pumpkin patch. They wait for hours and nothing happens. Then finally, Snoopy sneaks through the pumpkin patch and when Linus sees him, he's so shocked he faints.

When Linus comes around, Sally is livid with him. She says, "I was robbed! I spent the whole night waiting for the Great Pumpkin when I could have been out for tricks or treats! Halloween is over and I missed it! ... I could have had candy apples and gum! And cookies and money and all sorts of things! But no, I had to listen to you! What a fool I was...you owe me restitution!" What Sally realizes too late is that Halloween isn't about sitting around waiting for treats. It's about going. People have bought a ton of candy; it's all out there waiting. But you aren't getting any unless you go trick-or-treating! You gotta get up and get your bag and go!

Christmas and Halloween don't seem related, but they are at this hinge point – you gotta go. The good news is that God has already come to us. In Jesus, in this tiny little baby, God has arrived to be among us. He promised to always be with us through the Holy Spirit, even after His physical time on earth was done. We don't have the thousand miles to travel the magi did. God is here, tonight, at our own front door. We don't have far to travel.

But the chief priests and teachers of Israel, the ones who were supposed to care the most about the Messiah, they missed the greatest event in history only a two-hour walk away. If we want, we can stay in our comfy chair. We can even go buy Christmas presents and go through all the trappings of the holiday and sing all the songs and go to all the parties and still miss Jesus. We hardly have far to go to meet our Lord – but will we?

Will we risk getting out of our comfort zone and meeting God on His own terms? He's close but not comfortable; He's near but not risk-free; He's available but not at our beck and call. But He's at our doorstep. Will we get up to let Him into our hearts? May we all take that single step, to go to Him, and find that no matter who we've been in the past, how much we don't fit, God has made us into the right guys to worship Him. May we be like the magi, who proved in their pursuit of Jesus that they were truly wise men.