

FOCUS: The Good News is the Light of the World comes to Gentile and Jew alike.

In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How much of the Gospel appointed for today did you hear? I mean, how much did you *really* hear, and how much of it do you *think* you already know? What is the occupation of the visitors to Herod and the Holy Family? Kings? Nope. That's a legend, a piece of editorial license in a familiar hymn. The visitors were magi—magicians, star-gazers, astrologers, fortune tellers, take your pick. How many visitors came from the East? If your answer is "Three," then you are remembering the legends and not the Gospel. Matthew simply tells us that "wise men" arrived. Matthew never gives us a number of them. Now, don't be concerned about your confusion. Even pastors and preachers are known to give the same answers at times!

There is a *lot* of power in the message of the Gospel today. Unfortunately, much of it has been masked by the intrusion of legend and mythology into the story. Originally, Persian magi were interpreters of dreams. By the birth of Jesus, the term included astronomers, fortune-tellers, star gazers and the like. Magi were not really respectable men. They weren't "wise men," and they certainly weren't kings. They were horoscope fanatics, star gazers always looking for signs and events to explain why things happened or didn't happen. In fact, the Jewish standards *condemned* the work of the magi, and many Jews charged that the magi were heretics, worshipping false gods and idols. Far from being models of religious piety, the magi were more like the first century versions of Miss Cleo and the Psychic Friends Network without the 1-900 numbers.

In reality, the magi should have no place in the welcoming of the King of the Jews. The magi represented everything the Jewish people were not. They were the wrong race, the wrong color, the wrong religion. They didn't worship correctly. Even the gifts they brought were not really gifts, but items used in their own religious activities and magic. The magi were better suited to stand as examples of lack of faith and of unbelief, and not as models of proper, faithful behavior.

But God being God made use of what He had to take a part in the story of salvation. The magi understood signs and especially signs in the heavens and the movement of the stars. So, God used the star as a way in which to get the magi involved in bringing news of Emmanuel—God with us—to people who otherwise would never have known of him. The sign came to the magi where they were—in the east—and in a manner the magi would notice—as a star in the heavens. God got the attention of the magi where they were and in a manner in which they would understand. At the time of Jesus, the presence of a star or other astronomical event heralding the birth of a great figure or the coming of a great event was understood to be a normal part of life. So, to find the magi coming from a far land to investigate an astronomical phenomenon would have *not* been a surprise to Matthew's audience.

All this is well and good, and it explains for us a great deal about the text of the Gospel, opposed to continuing the legends and myths created through history. However, what can we learn from this that might apply to our lives and our situation today? Or, as Pastor Lon Solomon and the folks at McLean Bible Church would say, "So what?"

There's a lot in the answer to "So what?" Look at the magi. They were not part of the Jewish religious community, yet they came to know about Jesus by a sign that they would recognize coming to them *where they were*. The magi weren't expected to come to see some little baby in a stable in

Bethlehem (if, in fact, that is where the Holy Family really was at the time of the arrival of the magi, but that is a discussion for another time). No, the Good News came to them in their home country, where they were working and living. This is a model for us as well. Where are all the *unchurched* folks today? Where can we find those who have not heard the Good News of Jesus Christ and the message of salvation? Well, we find them in our workplaces and in our schools. They are in our neighborhoods, at the grocery, and in the mall. They are at the park, the soccer fields, and even in MCI Center or at Camden Yard. Some of the unchurched are even found in restaurants and bars! If God is to speak to all of these folks, God sure can't only speak to them on Sunday mornings when they are in the pews. They won't be there.

And so it is for the church as well. If we are to take the message of Jesus Christ to *all nations* as we are commanded by our Savior, then we must be willing to take the message outside these doors and into the places where it can be heard by those we can't and won't reach when they are in the pews. We have to bring the message in ways in which the receivers will hear it and see it.

To bring the message to those who aren't part of the community of faith—or who are not active in this or some other community of faith—we have to be ready, willing, and able to proclaim the message in a variety of ways, including those which are different that we are doing right now. We—and in saying “we” I mean this congregation, yes, but also the whole community of faith—must take the message out to people, because unless they are exposed to the message, they'll never even know that there *is* a message.

This means we reach out to the present-day magi—those who are not part of this church, denomination, or faith—where they are with signs they understand. We invite our neighbors and coworkers to come and worship with us, study with us, and fellowship with us. We open our doors to the community in ways that encourage those unfamiliar with us to come and visit with us and hear about us in ways that won't seem threatening to those not familiar with us. We host potlucks and festivals, music and drama performances, lectures and classes. We provide space for scouts and senior citizens, folks in recovery, and parents seeking a safe place to transfer custody of their children. We provide food and resources to those in need, and invite those who can to share in their bounty to help us provide these services.

If the magi—strangers from a strange land with strange traditions and beliefs—can come to worship the King of the Jews and show him the proper respect, then we should realize that there is nothing that can keep God from bringing Jesus into our lives, and nothing in our sinful lives can keep us away from Jesus or from the lives of other fellow sinners whom we meet every day and can benefit from the Good News we can bring to them.

Go and be a sign. Go and be a star. Be a light in the darkness of our world so that the Light of the World might shine in the lives of others. Thanks be to God!