

Some of the ways the wise men have been described over the years can be misleading. Take, for example, that song we sing about them: “We three kings of Orient are.” Popular song - but that description is misleading in a lot of ways. First, the bible never calls them kings – so they probably weren’t. And they did bring three kinds of gifts, but the bible doesn’t say there were three of them. Could have been two or ten, for all we know. It’s a misleading description.

But that’s not just true of the descriptions we give of them. It’s even kind of true of the word God uses for them. “Magi.” That’s what the Greek says, “magoi.” Unfortunately, it’s also where we get our English Word “magic.” So it can give us the idea that they were sorcerers or diviners or something – which the bible never indicates.

So maybe the least misleading description for these men is the title we most often use: “Wise men.” From what history tells us about magi, that’s probably closest to the mark. They were usually learned men - studied everything from history to nature to the stars – and were often employed by rulers as their advisers. Wise men.

But even that title – “wise men” – might mislead us as we look at this lesson this morning. It can give us the impression that the reason they found the Christ-child was because of their great wisdom and learning. Of all the people then, they were smart enough to figure out who Jesus is and how to find him and that they should worship him.

The more I study this, the more I realize how untrue that is. In fact, misses God’s point entirely. Not about a group of guys smart enough to find their Savior – it’s about a God who’s gracious enough to bring sinners to a Savior they never would have found on their own. And here’s why that matters: It’s every bit as true of how God operates with sinners, including these sinners, today. God doesn’t find wise people. He makes people wise.

**After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”**

**<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:**

**<sup>6</sup> “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 shepherd my people Israel.”**

**<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”**

**<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> 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, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.**

So these men were looking up at the night sky and studying the stars. When all of a sudden they noticed something different. In a spot in the sky where there had been only darkness, now there was light – a new star had risen. And immediately they knew what that meant: A king...the Savior...had been born in Israel.

But here's what you have to ask: How did they know that? We don't know for sure. Maybe they were interpreting a prophecy God gave about Jesus in the book of Numbers: "A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel." My opinion? The "east" they were from was Babylon, where the Prophet Daniel had worked with magi in the royal courts 500 years earlier. This was a prophecy he left behind that they had read.

Whatever the case, the answer to that question, "How did they know?" is this: God revealed it to them. If God hadn't told them, they would have been ignorant. They would have seen that star and said, "Wow! Cool, a new star." But because God told them and led them to trust it, they saw it and said, "Our Savior's been born."

You want more proof that, without God's revelation, they were in the dark? Look at what happens next. They head to Israel. But what city did they look for the newborn King in? Jerusalem. Was that where Jesus was? No. They were fundamentally ignorant about what God was up to! So they went to the one place where worldly wisdom would tell you to look for the king of the Jews. Jerusalem, the city of kings.

The problem with worldly wisdom? It leads you to conclusions about God that are all wrong. Places that are completely contrary to God's plan. This still happens a lot today – wise people of this world try to find a god that corresponds to what makes sense to them, that fits how they think God should be. That's why they don't find God as he truly is.

So the magi looked for Jesus in Jerusalem, but didn't find him. Instead, they found Herod. And if we're looking for wise men in this story, he's not one of them. Oh, by worldly standards, sure. He was as shrewd a politician as you could ever find. History's even called him Herod the Great! Great by the world's standards, but not wise by God's. The magi say to him, "Where is the one born King of the Jews? We saw his star and have come to worship him." And Herod – well, he thought *he* was the King of the Jews. No one would threaten his throne. And so he already starts plotting to kill the baby who was born to save him.

But again, I suppose we find a similar foolishness today. Sure, I've never heard anyone say they want to kill Jesus. But I've met a lot of people who know about him, like Herod...but work pretty hard to keep him at arm's length. Out of their lives. For a similar reason – see him as a threat to their rule, how *they* wanna live.

Herod did know enough, though, to call in the chief priests and ask some questions. Where would the Christ be born? Again, notice the theme – everyone is fundamentally ignorant about what God’s plan for the world is? Magi, Herod, even priests – would have had no idea what God was up to unless God had revealed it to them. And he did – a prophecy from Micah the prophet. “In Bethlehem, in Judea, 5 miles away – that’s where the Christ is born,” they said.

So what happened? Did these priests who studied and taught God’s Word for a living go? Pack up scrolls, put on their sandals, head 5 miles to Bethlehem? No. They had all the information necessary – just none of the wisdom to use it.

Again, not so different today, is it? A lot of people know the story of Jesus Christ – they just don’t really believe it. Know about it – but it’s just not important to them. They don’t have time to go 5 miles to go looking for him. Sometimes, you can have all the information and still have absolutely no wisdom.

You go looking for wise men in this story, you don’t find them. But I guess that shouldn’t surprise us. Because by nature, we’re no different. You see a little of all of the foolishness in this lesson in you, don’t you? All the information, not the wisdom to use it: Isn’t that me when I know what God wants for my life, but don’t do it? When I don’t have time to spend 5 minutes, much less walk 5 miles, to go learn from Savior in his Word? Isn’t there a part of me that sees Jesus as a threat, too? His commands burdensome, in the way of how I wanna run my life? That tries to fit God and my relationship with him into what I think it should be, not what he says it is?

Isaiah said it well in our first lesson: **See, darkness covers the earth, thick darkness the peoples.** This is a fundamental truth about our relationship with God – because of our sinfulness, we are by nature lost in the dark when it comes to understanding who God is and what God wants for us. And apart from revelation - God’s Word and the gift of faith - our attempts to find out about God are like stumbling around in the dark – lurching from one wrong notion to the next. Apart from God’s revelation, nothing but the darkness of ignorance.

But what happens when you’re stumbling around in the dark, tripping over things, and lost and all of a sudden – someone turns on the lights? All of a sudden, everything that was so confusing or frightening or worrying – it all makes sense. Because everything is different when the light’s on. Here’s the point of looking for wise men in Matthew chapter 2: God doesn’t find wise men. He makes men wise. And he does that by turning on the light.

Think of the lengths God in love went to to do that for the magi. He preserved a prophecy in a pagan land for centuries so they could hear it, then led them to trust it. He created a star so they’d know when he fulfilled it. He used another prophecy to point them to the right city. Then he moved the star over the very house where Jesus was so they could find him. They didn’t make a careful search, use deductive reasoning – didn’t use their brains at all. They simply listened to what God said and believed it – that is what makes a man spiritually wise. Listening to what God says and believing it. That always leads you to Jesus.

**<sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.**

These magi weren't wise men. They were gentiles, sinners, spiritually ignorant...an awful lot like you and me. And doesn't that make the good news at Epiphany all the more marvelous? God in heaven looked down and didn't find a single wise man. People, all living in darkness. And yet God said, "To them, I'll send a Savior." Not just for a select few. Not just for the Jews who for so long had the light of his Word. But for all. For Gentiles, living far away in a pagan land. For even a Herod, who wanted him dead, and chief priests who weren't interested. And for you and me. A baby born in Bethlehem who'd later die in Jerusalem to pay for all our sins and make us right with God.

But since you were in the dark about him, God did more. Think of the lengths God went to to turn on the lights for you! Preserved the message about Jesus for 20 centuries more. Brought it to pagan lands where our ancestors lived. Maybe didn't move stars, but moved history and people in your story all so God could turn on the light by revealing his Son to you as your Savior. So you could hear this message, believe it, be saved.

That's not something we do – that's God's gift to you. That truth is so important, it's all over Scripture. Like, remember when Peter made that confession about Christ? At a time when most were still in the dark about Jesus, Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter says, "You're the Christ, the Savior, the Son of the living God." And you really wanna pat him on the back – well done, Peter! So wise to figure that out! And then Jesus reminds Peter and us that God doesn't find wise people; he makes them wise. He said, "Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in heaven." God doesn't find wise men. He makes men wise – by his word, his sacrament, by revelation. He turns on the light, and everything looks different when the light's on.

That's important to remember when you have to go out and live in a world of people that are still living in the darkness. There are a lot of people in your life that the world would call wise, educated, brilliant. You know them. The physicist who says God had no part in creating the world. The professor who says Christian faith is parental brainwashing. Author who says they've got facts on their side, not "just" faith or wishful thinking. And they're certain they're right, and you're wrong. But certainty doesn't make you right. How in the world would we expect them to know what this world is really like when they've never seen it in the light?

Jesus knew you'd run into "wise" people like that. So he said something cool: "I praise you, father, that you've hidden these things from the wise and learned, but revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure." It pleases God that the truly wise people of the world are his children, who simply hear what God says, and believe it. That's what God led the Magi to do – so I guess we can call them wise men. And that's what God in grace has done for you and for me – he turned on the lights. God doesn't find wise men; he makes them. Amen.