

## “Early Recognizers of Jesus: The Magi”

Lucy Crain

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This morning we continue our sermon series on the early recognizers of Jesus. The focus of today, as was obvious from the readings, is on the Magi and the role they play in celebrating the holy birth. True confession on my part: I don't know about you, but I have always been more of a shepherds and angels fan myself. Every Christmas, as I place beloved nativity scenes around our house, and my children will tell you I have an excessive amount of them, I take particular care with the little shepherds and their tiny sheep. There is just something about the vulnerability of them, their lowly state in the social order of the day, and the fact that the angels of our Almighty God, at least according to Luke, would choose them to be the first to hear the good news of Christ's birth.

Unlike the lovely china lenox set from my grandmother that includes three gilded magi, one of my family's most beloved nativities, cost less than \$5. It includes a beloved Charlie Brown and Lucy as the holy parents, Linus as the humble shepherd, Snoopy wearing a pair of fluffy sheep ears, and tiny Woodstock in the manger. Every year it reminds me of watching the Charlie Brown Christmas Special with my children and hearing Linus with his adorable lisp repeating the famous words of the angel from Luke 2: "Fear Not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy that will be for all people." I had a seminary professor who claimed this would have been like Gabriel appearing to some auto-mechanics in Dellview instead of the folks in Raleigh to bring news of a new radical order of governance in our state. As the Jesus I adore and strive to follow has a preferential option for the poor and the oppressed, this idea of putting the shepherds first appeals to me a great deal.

So what to do with these magi? These travelers of wealth and prestige? I must confess that when I place our nativities around the house, I am significantly less concerned with the Magi. The camels tower over the sheep, the men (and of course they are men) stand tall and wear crowns, and they are bringing expensive gifts to the babe. Sometimes, I tuck the camels sort of behind the creche or place the wise men off to the side while the sheep are front and center. It brings to mind the lines of the hymn that we sing each advent "what shall I bring him, I bring him my heart." I tend to feel bad for the tattered shepherd showing up with only his love and adoration when the kings come with their pricey offerings.

After some thorough explorations of the texts this week, I think I may have been a bit hard on the Magi. Despite what we learned growing up, we do not know they are kings. We do not know they are a party of three. In fact, we know very little about them except that they are foreigners. They are non-Jews who are boldly seeking out a Jewish King. They were most likely not even welcome to travel in the lands they had to pass through. However, they have seen a revelation in the heavens that the God of all creation is on the move, doing something new in the world, and they are certain, they know definitively, they need to be a part of whatever that looks like. You may remember as a child thinking the gifts of the magi were laid by the manger days after Christ's birth, but we know now the journey must have taken months, or even years. It would have been an expensive and dangerous journey, even for those of status and privilege.

However, we do tend to remember the Magi for their gifts. I bet most of the children in our church could repeat for you "gold, frankincense, and myrrh" even before they know what those words mean. However, a careful reading of the text shows that the Magi's first offering was to pay homage. To bow down and worship. Homage in the original Greek means to "prostrate oneself before a king" and implies the

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giving of one's entire self in service. Some theologians call this the First Gift of the magi. The material gifts are secondary. The Lord is grateful for them but his ultimate desire is for the offering of ourselves.

Okay, so let me return to my beloved shepherds. I am grateful for the image of God coming to meet lowly and vulnerable people wherever they are and bringing them the good news of the gospel; to know God prioritizes them though they have nothing to offer but their love and adoration. The image of God, as the hound of heaven seeking every human heart, is steadfast and gives me hope for the world. However, if I am honest with myself, I am not a shepherd. I am a magi. I am a person of privilege in a world that God is breaking into with a new reality. What example do the Magi give me? In my educated and privileged position, it is up to me, like the Magi, to fervently seek the King of the Jews despite any dangers. I must risk what is necessary to pay homage to the King.. Yes, God wants my offerings of wealth but first God seeks my heart.

As we look back at the Old Testament words of the prophet Isaiah that Scott read earlier, it is easy to reduce this passage to only a fulfillment of scripture by Christ's birth. However, upon closer examination, God is inviting us into a theological imagination that not only provides hope for the future but also an assurance of a Kingdom that is already on the horizon. As we celebrated the life of God's servant Martin Luther King, Jr. this week, we remember he called for the work of courage, faith, wisdom, and imagination that God supplies for us to make a new creation. A world God desires for us to help make.

One of my favorite post Christmas poems comes from the theologian Howard Thurman and I think he summarizes well the work we have to do as Magi in this Epiphany world:

“When the song of the angels is stilled, When the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, When the shepherds are back with their flock, The work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among others, To make music in the heart”

Yes, God seeks to bring good news to the vulnerable and to bring the light of hope into the darkness of the world. Yet God also calls us as Magi, not because he needs our gifts to fulfill the work of the kingdom, but because God desperately desires our homage and the gifts of ourselves. What does that look like? I think it might look something like this: “Arise, shine, for your light has come.”

All thanks be to God.