



GETTING PAST THE GRINCH

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All the Whos down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville, did not.

That was a bit of an understatement, wasn't it? I always had a bit of anxiety watching that Christmas special as a kid. The Grinch was so creepy looking. Anybody with that thick of eyebrows can't be trusted. Plus the part where he gets stuck in the chimney always made me feel so claustrophobic. And the way he lied to Cindy Lou Who who was no more than two was highly disturbing.

Dr. Seuss may have come up with a pretty despicable character, but there was a Grinch long before the children's book came out. Clear back at the birth of Christ, Matthew tells us about an evil, conniving man who also had the idea of trying to steal Christmas.

Matthew 2:1-16

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."

Now doesn't that sound as sneaky and underhanded as the Grinch?

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.

In his book, *The Power of Paradox*, H. Evan Woodhead said, “Sometimes in order to learn what you need to know, you need to forget what you think you know.”

We think we know a lot about the wise men. But most of what we think we know has been made up over the years. There’s not much substance to it. We have to unlearn some of those things so we can learn what we need to know about the real magi.

One year at Christmas, I was guest preaching at a church, and in my message I was going to talk about who the wise men really were, much like this morning. Unfortunately, I had to follow a skit this woman did about the wise men that was built entirely on the myths of who they were. I couldn’t change my points at that stage, so I had to try and gently undo everything she had said. It was a disaster. Maybe that’s why they never asked me to come back and speak again.

What are some of these myths about the three wise men?

- 1. That there were three** – We don’t know how many there were. The Eastern Orthodox churches actually thought there were twelve. The number three just originated because there were three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.
- 2. That they were kings** – You can thank the song *We Three Kings* for that one. As far as we know, they were not royalty at all.
- 3. That they came to the stable** – It’s a whole lot easier to put on the Christmas pageant when everyone just shows up at the same place, with no scene change. But the wise men didn’t arrive when the shepherds did: they came when Jesus was a little older and Mary and Joseph had moved into a house.

There are other myths, too. Different reports make at least two different claims of where the final resting place of the magi can be found. They were given names around the 8th century. People have speculated what they did before and after their journey. Some of it has been brilliantly creative. They’re the kind of characters that invite imagination. But it’s all made up.

We don’t really need any of that to make the story interesting. What Matthew DOES tell us is fascinating enough. To begin with, he shares with his readers that these were magi from the east. The east is a pretty broad description, but the vagueness of it lends a certain mystique to the story. The magi were from far off, exotic places with foreign sounding names. Saying “the east” placed them outside of the Jewish community. Most likely their home was somewhere in Persia, such as Babylon, because that was a civilization where magi lived and worked. If you remember the story of Daniel, he worked among magi.

You can't think about the east or Babylon without recalling Israel's history. Because there were a lot of memories that flowed from that direction. That was the land of captivity. That's where the Israelites had been slaves and exiles, a land of idols and oppression. So there is a hint of sadness and pain that the word east represents.

As far as the magi themselves, magi is plural for magician or wizard. They served as advisors to kings and acted as the religious authorities. They were astrologers and sorcerers, dabbling in a whole range of witchcraft and magic arts.

These were not the kind of people that came to Jerusalem everyday, and the kind of life they led was off limits for the people of Israel. God had forbidden the practice of any kind of divination or witchcraft. In regards to astrology specifically, God had said,

Deuteronomy 4:19

And also carefully guard yourselves so that you don't look up into the skies and see the sun and moon and stars, all the constellations of the skies, and be seduced into worshiping and serving them.

Stars are not to govern our lives. The magi were part of a pagan culture and what they believed was very different from the God of the Bible. To be a magician was to be involved in a dark world with dark spiritual forces.

And yet...and yet God chose to reveal himself to them! It's one of the most remarkable pieces of the Christmas story. Instead of reaching out to some of the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem, God singled out some men half way around the world who were enmeshed in a way of life that was totally contrary to his commands, and he told them about Jesus being born.

Not only that, he used the language they understood: He spoke to them through the stars. Even when these people were steeped in something that was sinful, God found a creative way to reach them. I think that's outstanding. There are no limits on what he can use to connect with us

The Russian poet, Irina Ratushinskaya, grew up in the U.S.S.R. in the communist era. She had zero exposure to anything religious at all. She went to school where she was taught by her communist teachers to not believe in God. But God used their very words to reach Irina's heart. She thought to herself, "There must be a God. Otherwise, they wouldn't tell us over and over that there is no God."

How ironic is it that God spoke to her through communist teachings? That sparked the beginning of her spiritual trek. She was eventually given a Bible and found Christ. The government put her in a labor camp for 4 years because of her beliefs, and she became a powerful voice for change.

That's just one quick example. I'll give you one more. Author Don Richardson has written a little book called "Eternity in Their Hearts" in which he cites story after story of how God has revealed himself to people in the most unbelievable ways, in even the most primitive, remote cultures around the world. For instance in Burma, or Myanmar, the Karen people had a tradition of worshipping a God called Y'wa who was the supreme being and creator of the universe. According to tradition, two people broke his commandment bringing suffering into the world. Sounds familiar doesn't it?

They also had a tradition that a white foreigner would come across the sea from the west with white wings (sails) and bring them Y'wa's white book. So in 1795, when Great Britain ruled Burma and an English diplomat came for a visit, he was taken aback when the Karen people asked him if he had brought their lost book and he wrote it down in his journals. And in 1812, when the missionary Adoniram Judson arrived with the Bible, the Karen people were ready to receive its message.

Jeremiah 23:23

"Am I only a God nearby," declares the LORD, "and not a God far away?"

This is our God – the God who reaches out to us when we feel furthest away from him. Maybe you are feeling distant from God this morning. Maybe not religiously necessarily, but emotionally. There's a wide gulf between you. Maybe you feel like you're living in the land of captivity, you're in a place of darkness and oppression and you feel trapped. You are never far from God, and he speaks your language. We can't go too far because wherever we go, he is already there. And he will tap into all creation in order to reach you.

These magi respond to God reaching them, and they start out on this journey toward Christ. They are excited to discover more about who he is. They compare their astrological findings with prophecies in Scripture, and it points them toward Jerusalem.

It's hard to believe that it was ten years ago when the whole world was talking about Y2K. Some people were hoarding toilet paper and bags of rice while others were selling their homes and moving to the mountains. There was a lot of hype and speculation about the end of the world or some kind of apocalypse. Everyone was talking about it.

This year, you may have seen the movie 2012, or heard the buzz about how the Mayan calendar ends in December of that year. Once again, the chatter is all about what's going to happen and whether or not doomsday is just around the corner. There's always a new theory about how the world will end, and we keep having to be reminded that Jesus said only God knows the times.

But people were not all that different 2000 years ago. There had been ancient predictions about that time period, and enough people were paying attention to prophecies that there was a lot of speculation something was going to happen. Even outside Judaism, expectations were high. Suetonius, who was a Roman historian shortly after the time of Jesus, wrote this:

Throughout the whole of the East there had spread an old and persistent belief: destiny had decreed that at that time men coming forth from Judea would seize power [and rule the world].

So when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem with their questions, it fueled the fire of end times speculation. As Matthew put it, it disturbed people. Especially Herod. The magi rather innocently asked if anybody knew about this new baby, probably guessing he was a new son of Herod's. They assume that if it's the new king of the Jews that they're looking for, they're most likely to find him at the very heart of Israel, Jerusalem. They saw Herod as the gatekeeper who would know everything, and they naturally wanted to check in with him first. Little did they realize that rumors of a new king would upset the old one.

Herod had spent a lifetime fighting and scrapping for power. He had a bad habit of killing off anybody he thought threatened his future. He had 3 of his own sons killed who were getting a little too ambitious. It was so well known how brutal he was that Caesar Augustus is on record saying that it was better to be one of Herod's pigs than his sons.

So when Herod catches wind of this news, he immediately jumps into action, and his response is characterized by three things. The first is **deception**. He hides his meeting with the magi from everyone else, keeping his agenda secret. Then he lies to the magi, telling them he's all about worshipping Jesus, too.

This is because he is in a mode of **self-preservation**. He's ready to do anything to protect his territory – even kill babies if necessary. He isn't interested in whether or not the prophecies were correct: he can only see his own future.

In the process, he demonstrates a great deal of **arrogance**. Herod believes he can take care of this problem simply and easily on his own. He has the audacity to think that he could thwart something God has been planning since the beginning of the world.

Of course this is all ridiculous, since Jesus wasn't a political figure. But Herod saw one thing clearly that nobody else recognized: An encounter with Christ always means a crisis of power. When the King of kings comes on the scene, it's going to have an impact.

I see this entire story as one that plays out in each of our lives. It is a mini-metaphor for our faith experience. Because we are the magi and we are Herod. We are both seekers of God and rulers of our own domain, and when those two pieces of us meet. We start out feeling separated or disconnected from God, and in one way or another he reaches out to us. We choose to start on the journey toward him, growing in our understanding of who he is along the way. We share in that quest of the wise men: Where can I find Christ?

As we get closer, we find that another question clashes with the first one, and that is Herod's question: How does he threaten me? He DOES pose a threat, because recognizing who he really is will mean giving up control.

We can find ourselves reacting the same way as Herod. We resort to deception because we don't want to deal with the truth. We find ways of hiding or denying what's really going on.

Karin had a friend who once told her she didn't like going to church because she didn't like listening to other people's interpretations of the Bible. So Karin asked, "So are you reading the Bible for yourself and coming to your own conclusions?" "Uh...no, not really." She didn't really have any interest in getting to the truth. In fact, she wanted to avoid what other people were pointing out, because if she listened to them, she would have to change her life.

That's the self-preservation side of it. We sacrifice truth because we want to protect the way things are right now. We like being in charge of our own lives. So we may ignore the little feelings in our conscience, the voice inside that's telling us we need to change. We try to push Christ's influence out of the way, distancing ourselves from Christian friends or filling our life with other things so we don't have to think about him.

And that's when we slip into a kind of arrogance. Pride takes us into battle with God, making us feel like we can resist and overcome him. And God is not one to force his will on us. He has given us an incredible amount of freedom, even when that means rejecting him. But make no mistake: all of us will one day have to acknowledge that he's in charge and we are not.

Romans 14:10-11

Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God...Read it for yourself in Scripture:

"As I live and breathe," God says, "every knee will bow before me; Every tongue will tell the honest truth that I and only I am God."

Even Herod will one day have to admit that Jesus is the rightful person to be in charge, because he alone is the Lord. We all will be in that spot someday. In the meantime, we face daily choices: Will we let Christ have control today in this decision, in this crisis, or will we struggle to stay in charge ourselves?

The magi were able to push through Herod's resistance and travel on to come face to face with Jesus.

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 super pumped.

That's my own translation there at the end. A literal translation of the Greek would be, "they rejoiced with over-the-top great joy." So I'd say that's pretty close. It was pure delight to finally reach their destination.

Herod was so wrapped up in his own thing back at the castle, worrying about losing power, that he missed the whole point of this new baby, which was joy to the world. Like the Grinch, his heart was two sizes too small, and he couldn't see past himself.

We can get so caught up in what we will have to give up to follow God, with the control we have to hand over that we miss the whole point: Jesus is a delight. Finding him is finding what we've been looking for all our lives.

I like the story of Blaise Pascal, the French mathematical genius who lived back in the 1600s. He once pointed this out:

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. This is the motive of every action of every man...

That's very true: the pursuit of happiness drives us all. We want to be in a state where we feel good. But in Pascal's case, for him that meant he spent the first 31 years of his life running away from God. He didn't see God as the source of his happiness.

And then, on November 23, 1654, he encountered God in a profound vision and had much the same reaction as when the magi found Jesus. He immediately wrote down his thoughts about it and sewed the little piece of parchment inside his coat, where a servant found it after his death 8 years later. It said this:

Year of grace 1654, Monday 23 November. . . from about half past ten at night to about half an hour after midnight, FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. "My God and your God." . . . Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of joy. . . Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. May I not fall from him forever. I will not forget your word. Amen.

It doesn't take a spectacular vision to discover the joy of knowing Christ. Peter wrote to one group of believers and said this:

1 Peter 1:8-9

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

That joy is available to all of us when we move past our inner Herod and pursue him. He is what our hearts most crave, and the closer we press to him, the more we discover what true happiness is about. When the magi reach Jesus, Matthew tells us

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh

It's the first recorded baby shower, and all the guests are men! One more surprise from the magi.

I like how Matthew says they "opened their treasures." I'm sure they had been carefully guarding this wealth for months, protecting it and shielding it from bandits and thieves who would want to rob them. Now it's safe to reveal what's inside. There's no more worrying about what will happen once the locks are off and the lid is opened.

Part of coming to Christ is opening our heart to him. It is giving to him what we treasure most, and trusting that it is safe with him. Maybe you've had to closely guard yourself for a long time, because you've been hurt. Maybe you've found out that other people haven't been safe, and it's difficult for you to open up. You are safe with Jesus. You can open your heart wide to him and give to him what you've been carrying around for so long.

Much has been written about the symbolism of the gifts the magi brought to Christ -- gold, frankincense and myrrh. We could read all kinds of things in them that may or may not be true, so I will keep my comments to one simple thought.

And that is this: these are obviously not baby gifts. There are no rattles or teething rings in their bags. No pull toys or onesies. The magi are not thinking of him as a toddler -- they're viewing him as he will be in the future. So the gifts they bring are for a grown up Jesus. The gold represents the wealth and glory of a king. Frankincense was the only incense allowed to be burned in the temple by the priests. And myrrh was used to prepare Jesus' body for his burial.

King. Priest. Savior. These are the roles we need to recognize in Jesus. We need a grown up faith that begins to understand just how big he is. A Jesus who is King of kings and Lord of lords, who will one day set the world right, and who is to rule my life right now. A Jesus who is our priest, standing before God and representing us in his presence, praying for us. A Jesus who is our Savior, whose death brought us life, whose love and sacrifice paid for our sin. The closer in we get to the Jesus of the manger, the more we're drawn to worship the eternal Son of God in all his glory.

Things changed for the wise men after they encountered Jesus.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Where before they were star gazers, now God is communicating with them directly and personally. And their sense of what is right and what is wrong have been affected. They

are no longer bound to what Herod said. His wishes no longer dictate their choices. God rerouted them as they went on their way.

We no longer have to be controlled by the Grinch in our hearts. The more time we spend in Christ's presence, the freer we become. God gives us a new path forward and releases us from our fears. We don't have to do what we've always done. Patterns change when we encounter Jesus.

As I said at the beginning, we are all on a journey. Where are you at in yours this morning? Do you feel far away from God? God is near, even when you can't feel him. And he speaks your language.

Maybe you're locked in a power struggle with God right now. What are you wanting to control that he's asking you to give up? The prospect may sound frightening, but there is exceeding great joy waiting for you.

Maybe you're needing to open more of your heart to Christ. Are there things you've been afraid to share with him? There is no one more trustworthy to let in.

I close with those words of Blaise Pascal:

FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. "My God and your God." . . . Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of joy. . . Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. May I not fall from him forever. I will not forget your word. Amen.