

SIGNS IN THE SKY

Matthew 2:1-12

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This past week the planets Jupiter and Venus came close together in a brilliant display of united light. In 2 B.C., a similar event happened that many scientists now believe was The Star of Bethlehem. This star led the Magi on a trek across the desert to seek the King of the Jews.

We don't know a lot about the Magi due to all the history that's been lost over the years. But some documents did survive. Particularly those of Philo, a Jew who studied in Alexandria. He wrote of an Eastern School of Magi that was well-respected. These magi studied the natural order of the universe, and were regarded as the scientists and healers of their day. They originated in the courts of Persia as men of holiness and wisdom.

There is some speculation that this Magi School in the East may have begun by Daniel, a Jew that was led into Babylonian Captivity under King Nebuchednezzar. Daniel never went home to Jerusalem, and continued to serve as an advisor to King Cyrus after the death of Nebuchednezzar. It is thought that the Magi that came to seek the Baby Jesus were probably from this School in the East.

We're told that these magi had been searching the skies for a sign. They were knowledgeable of some of the prophecies regarding the birth of the King of the Jews. They had been watching the skies for a specific sign. Anticipating a birth. And so, when the star appeared, they were ready. They knew the time had come.

Have you ever anticipated a birth? The excitement that comes as a due date gets closer, and a new life is about to enter the world? Susu Sanders gave me permission to share part of her story this morning. Her anticipation for the birth of a child, to become a mother, became woven together with agony. For years, she would become pregnant, and then miscarry. One of her miscarriages came close to ending her life. The darkness of that moment almost made her give up on her own life too. But God gently intervened and brought her peace. Restored her will to live. And she handed over the desire to have a child completely into God's hands, God's timing. She waited a long time.

Then, six years ago, God worked a miracle in her life. God sent her and Milton a sign. A child was about to be born to 2 teenagers that wanted to put the baby up for adoption. A pastor asked Milton if he knew of a couple who might be interested in adopting this baby? On November 1, 2002, Michelle was born. And Susu and Milton were able to adopt her.

That's a *very* edited version of everything that God orchestrated for Milton and Susu to become Michelle's parents, but the point is: it happened in God's time, and not theirs. And because the events were so miraculously arranged, it also directed all the glory to God. It wasn't about the birth parents, or the pastor of the church, or Milton and Susu, or even baby Michelle. It was about God. Everyone fell down and worshipped God.

And now Milton and Susu stand on the brink of another adoption. Another miracle. Another sign given. This time two more teenagers. Another baby needing a home. A boy. They could have said “No, this is not our baby. We’re happy with the life we have. Besides, we’re too old to adopt another baby.” Instead, they opened their hearts to God’s revelation. And as the circumstances unfolded, it seemed too clearly that this child *was* meant for them. And so they’re wading through international adoption laws, psychological testing, and home studies as they follow another star God has placed before them. And we wait with them, eagerly anticipating the birth of another baby.

When God puts a star in your sky, do you recognize it? Like the Magi, are you daily seeking God’s signs for your life? And once you recognize them, do you follow where God leads?

The star led the Magi far from home, on a dangerous trek across the desert. The star was there for anyone to follow; only these men had the spiritual acuity to be led by it. If you are willing to let God lead you through the day-to-day events of your life, he will do it. The road may not always be easy, but God will lead you—if you’re willing to follow.

The star led the Magi from the East to Jerusalem. Seeking a king, they went to the first obvious place to look: the palace. But King Herod didn’t have a clue about this baby. We’re told that when the Magi conversed with King Herod and his court, everyone was disturbed. Why? Because they had seen the bright star in the sky and hadn’t realized its implications. Even the chief priests and teachers of the law were spiritually blind to the significance of this star. Even after they quote the prophecy from Micah to the Magi, none of them seemed to get too excited. Can you imagine how puzzled the Magi must have been at this lack of enthusiasm? All the clues were right in front of Herod & the religious leaders, obvious to anyone who looked, but they all seemed blind to the fact that the Messiah had been born.

So a disturbed Herod set out to deceive the Magi. He was insanely suspicious. If he suspected anyone as a rival to his power, that person was promptly eliminated. He murdered his wife, his mother-in-law, his eldest son and two other sons. One Roman emperor said that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. (page 29, *Commentary on Matthew* by William Barclay) Herod was afraid that the baby the Magi spoke of was going to interfere with his life, his place, his power, and his influence. So he set out to destroy him. (page 30, Barclay) He pretended interest in what the Magi were seeking, but we know he was threatened by the birth of a Jewish King. A Messianic King no less. His desire was not to worship the Christ Child. As we learn later in Matthew 2:16, his desire was to kill him.

They are still a lot of King Herods out there. People grasping for power. People who are threatened by a relationship with Jesus. Who are threatened by *your* relationship with Jesus. People who will thwart you in your desire to follow God, to worship the Christ Child. On the surface they may appear interested, but underneath their desire is to throw you off track, to derail your course, to disrupt your goal.

Therefore, when you follow God’s signs for your life, expect to run into some roadblocks, some detours, some rough road ahead. Don’t be surprised by the doubters. Don’t be surprised by ridicule. Don’t be surprised by the cynics.

When David and I discerned that God was leading us to serve in Mexico, not everyone jumped up and down with joy. We heard: “You can’t drink the water. What about dengue fever? More people get kidnapped in Mexico than any other country in the world.” And even after we’ve lived here for 9 years, people still ask us, “When are you moving back home?” And these were our friends! We hadn’t even come up against the people that I deemed the “King Herods” in our lives yet.

But the negative feedback didn’t deter us. Why? Too many other events had fallen into place that it couldn’t be coincidence that we were supposed to be in Mexico. They were God incidences! And today, when I get discouraged or disillusioned about my life and work here in Mexico, I go back and rehearse the story of how God brought us here. All those signs strung so closely together that they made a brilliant star, a star that led to Mexico, a star we couldn’t ignore. And when I gaze at that star, I’m reminded of who I’m grounded in, of who guides my footsteps, of who watches over me both day and night.

Then it doesn’t matter what the King Herods say or do. Like the Magi, my face is set towards the Christ Child and I won’t be swayed.

When the Magi arrive in Bethlehem and find Jesus, he is living with his parents in a house. The original Greek text tells us that he is no longer a baby but a toddler. The Magi bow down, worship him, and present him with three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Perhaps you’ve heard the significance of these three gifts? Gold is the gift for a king. Jesus came as the Messiah King. Frankincense is the gift for a priest. This incense was used in the temple worship and temple sacrifices. Like a priest, Jesus opened the way between God and human kind. Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. It was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to die so that you and I might have eternal life.

The Magi brought gifts that would have specific purposes as the life of Jesus unfolded. Did they know how symbolic their gifts would be in the life of Jesus? Probably not. But God did and had placed on their hearts these three gifts. Tradition says that Mary and Joseph used the gold to finance their flight into Egypt to escape from Herod’s wrath. Frankincense, long used to enhance the immune system in mid-eastern medicine, treated the family’s fevers, aches and chills as Jesus grew to adulthood. And the myrrh was used to anoint Jesus’ body after his death.

Is that how the gifts were actually used? We don’t know. But however they were used, we do know that they played a specific role and purpose in Jesus’ life.

As you come to worship Jesus this Christmas, what gift would you bring? How is God asking you to grow, stretch, and change as you bow down and worship him?

Sometimes we don’t think we have anything worthy to give. But I think Jesus is concerned less with a physical gift, and more with our obedience, with our hearts. Of simply coming into his presence. Of recognizing who he is. Of acknowledging him as God’s son, someone to be adored and worshiped. Scripture tells us that when we come to God in humility, when we seek God with our entire hearts, then we will find God.

Like the Magi, do you have the determination to follow the signs all the way to Jesus? To give him your total self? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength, and all your soul?

The Matthew account tells us that the Magi were warned in a dream to go home by another route. They are not to return to King Herod's court. God protects their lives and allows them to return home to give testimony of their encounter with the Christ Child.

Did they know an alternate route across the desert? Did some of them freak out at the change of plans? Did some wonder at the wisdom of having made the journey in the first place? Or did they praise God for warning them and rejoiced in the opportunity to escape with their lives? Did they see the last minute travel advisory as an adventure, a miracle, and not as a major inconvenience?

In the book *Prince Caspian* by C.S. Lewis, the lion Aslan tells the young girl Lucy, "Things never happen the same way twice."

In other words, God's ways are not our ways! We are creatures of habit while God makes a habit of being creative. Like the Magi, the way we arrived at a destination, may not be the way we leave. The story of the Magi reminds us to be prepared for new strategies, new possibilities, new paths through the wilderness.

Some of you are recently unemployed. God may provide your next job in a way that totally surprises you, in a field that totally surprises you, with people that totally surprise you. But what you can be assured of is this: if you're looking for God to show up, if you're looking for signs of God's presence, then eventually, like the Magi, they will be revealed to you.

When you face a major decision in your life, you don't have to make that decision alone. God will guide you. He doesn't always speak to you through an audible voice or send a message by a dream, but Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not to your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths."

The Bible becomes a lamp unto your feet and a light onto your path. The Holy Spirit illuminates your conscience so you have more of a sensitivity of right and wrong. God will direct you at times when you aren't even aware of his providence. How many times in your life has just the right person, just the right circumstance, just the right protection been there? That was not a coincidence. That was God.

Dr. James Dobson relates a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior through a slow developing cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, she was almost snowed in by a brutal weather system. In her grief and loneliness, Stella had made the decision not to decorate this year. She just didn't have the energy. All she wanted was a sign that God still remembered her, still loved her.

Late that afternoon the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box. He said, "Mrs. Thornhope?" She nodded. He said, "Would you sign here?" She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold.

She signed the paper and said, "What's in the box?" The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, "This is for you, Ma'am. He's six weeks old, completely housebroken." The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

"Who sent this?" Mrs. Thornhope asked. The young man set the animal down and handed her an envelope and said, "It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift to you." The young man then handed her a book about puppies. In desperation she asked again, "Who sent me this, this puppy?" As the young man turned to leave, he said, "Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas."

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then. She wiped away the tears, put the letter down; and then remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden furry ball and held it to her neck

Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come." Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and a wonder greater than the grief and loneliness. And she spoke to the dog, "Little fella," she said, "it's just you and me. But you know what?" she said. "There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'd like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. How about let's go get it?"

God has a way of sending a signal of light to remind us life is stronger than death. Light is more powerful than darkness. God is more powerful than Satan. Good will overcome evil.

The story of the Magi is more than just a story of three men on camels following a star and looking for a baby. It's about recognizing the signs God sends us, and then following those signs into a deeper relationship with him.

Adopting a baby, moving to Mexico, embracing the gift of an unexpected puppy . . . God shows up in mysterious and marvelous ways.

What is your Bethlehem Star this morning?

Where does it lead?

Will you follow it?

If you do, I can guarantee that it will lead you closer to Jesus.

Let's pray.