

Explore the Bible: Saves

December 7, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for Dec. 26 focuses on Matthew 2:1-12.*

I am not a concert attender. The number of concerts I have attended is not even a double-digit number. But a few years ago, I was presented with an opportunity to see an artist who universally would be labeled a legend. The concert was five hours away, in a town I am never pleased to have to visit, but it was him, and I had to go. Despite the crowds, the drive, the parking and all the other elements of the trip, I don't regret the decision to go. It was totally worth it.

What sort of event, person or place would be worth it for you to travel long distances to see? Where is the line for you in how far you would travel? Are there realities that are so significant to you that you would be willing travel whatever distance it took to get there?

This week's lesson involves the well-known narrative of the magi's trip to see king their inspection of the stars had told them had been born. Because we can't specifically identify the starting point of the magi, we can't say for certain how long their journey was. But if most scholars are right that the land of the "east" is ancient Persia or Mesopotamia, we are looking at a voyage of around 1,200 miles. It was a voyage they took with enthusiasm and excitement over the one they would meet—the one they came to worship.

The Arrival (Matthew 2:1-3)

The narrative simply starts with the arrival of the magi and the stir they caused in Jerusalem. What caused the stir? Some would argue it was fear

over Herod's reaction to foreigners acknowledging a king other than himself. Indeed, Herod was known to be quite paranoid. We know he killed at least one wife and three his own sons out of fear that they were trying to supplant him.

Others would suggest the mere presence of the magi would have caused such a stir. The number three probably is the result of a linkage of each magus with a single gift. Most likely, they would have had a significant entourage to risk journeying the distance they traveled with the treasures they carried.

The text, however, says it was the hearing of their message that a king had been born and that they had come to worship him that caused the commotion. For some in Jerusalem, this statement would have caused joy, hope and excitement. For others, the news would have resulted in anger, fear and repulsion. Truly, today the response of people to the message of the Christ and what he brings is no different in the disparity between these same extremes.

The Direction (Matthew 2:4-8)

The scholars and leaders pointed the magi in the direction of Bethlehem. At this point, Matthew uses a method, common in rabbinic circles, of altering the text he is quoting to make a significant point for his readers and us. The scholars quote Micah 5:2, which says in part, "Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clan of Judah," (NIV). But Matthew quotes the passage as saying "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah" (NIV).

Micah's emphasis had been on how inconsequential Bethlehem was and that it was fitting that God would abandon Jerusalem to go to the place of David's birth for the coming Messiah— an action that was both a blessing and a punishment of sorts. Matthew's emphasis, on the other hand, was

how the arrival of this king had changed the status and standing of Bethlehem to being a place no longer inconsequential at all.

The Discovery (Matthew 2:9-12)

At this point in the narrative, we come to understand the star as something more than simply an astronomical occurrence. Scholars and inquisitive people of all sorts have spent years trying to identify what exactly it was that the magi saw in the sky. Whatever it may have been initially, it now appears to be a manifestation of God himself. One can't help but think of the pillar of fire by night that led Israel, now leading the magi to the destination God had designed for them. This time, the travelers discover that the destination is God himself.

At the heart of this narrative is an account of outsiders (magi - gentiles) who became outsiders while the insiders (the residents of Jerusalem became outsiders). But even deeper than that is the reality of a God who went to great lengths to reveal the truth of who he is. Not only did God reach out to people from a distant land, he reached out using means that are striking and unique. At the end of the passage, what we discover is that regardless of how far we might be willing to travel to discover God, he has already gone much further to connect with us. That is the true focus of Christmas!

Timothy Pierce, Ph.D., is associate professor of Christian studies at East Texas Baptist University.