

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 2: 1-12

What kind of evidence matters to you? What kind of validation, corroboration, attestation do you find convincing? If you are going to believe something in this day and age of alternative facts and blatant untruths, what kind of proof do you need? If the ancients wanted to convince you that God has inhabited our world in a particular way through the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, how could they get through to you?

In all likelihood stars, angels, dreams, prophetic forerunners, and the writings of the prophets do not have the same effect on us as the gospel writers intended. But, in a more ancient context, these were fairly convincing proofs. All these proofs in combination, they provide a pretty solid case, like a lawyer convincing a jury with various pieces of corroborating evidence. You see the gospel writers saw it all around them in various signs, and are trying to corroborate for us in as many ways as possible, that this common story about a couple traveling as refugees to be registered with no place to land, this story about a child being born in the hills of Judah, that this common story, is not common; that this humble story is a remarkable one; that something astonishing happened that night; God did a new thing.

Angels and dreams – these were common ways of God speaking and telling of what is to come, it is the way that God often revealed God’s self in ages past, the way God often came forth when God was intervening in some new and dramatic way – God revealed to Abram in a vision that his descendants would number the stars. Jacob beheld the dream of angels ascending and descending from heaven, or Joseph’s dreams in Egypt, or the boy Samuel in the Temple. And now a dream announcing another child, but not just another messenger, not just another champion, but one conceived by God, one partaking of God’s own nature.

dreams, angels, scriptures, John the Baptist leaping in Elizabeth’s womb... All ways of saying that God is at work here. And add to this, the celestial hosts observable in the night sky. Because how else would we know? Because how else would we understand? For God in the Old Testament and in the ancient world is most often lauded as being strong, the Lord of hosts, greater than all the other gods, able to lead Israel out of Egypt with God’s strong hand, to route Israel’s enemies, and so on and so forth. Strength, power, potency. So how can we know

this child is from God while he is so small, vulnerable, and unassuming, this child not born in a palace, but in stable of a humble home.

The Magi saw the star from far away. The Magi are, perhaps, the last of Christmas' cast of characters to attest to the significance of these events, the last to come to the manger and offer their curiosity, and their gifts. It is Matthew who tells us of these scholars from the East who observed a star that heralded an important birth and came to see.

Stars, the celestial bodies of the sky, in the ancient Near East, they were seen more as lesser deities with agency rather than passive objects in the sky. The starry hosts that were windows into the divine, into the design and will for the world – and written into that divine will for the eyes that could behold it and interpret it was the news that God was doing some new and remarkable thing, that a king was born to the Jews.

Now, you may note that I referred to these men just a moment ago as scholars. I think that is correct. Matthew seems to have some respect for and interest in scholars as people who can valuably attest the credibility and significance of these events, of the Christ-child being born into the world. Why do I say this, because he begins his gospel by validating the importance of Christ's birth through genealogy, through the words of the prophets, and through the witness of these astrologers.

Now I realize that we don't always consider astrology as scholarship, any more than reading tarot cards or your daily horoscope. But scholars in the ancient world were those trained to be attentive and to codify certain areas of knowledge, one of those areas of knowledge being movement in the night sky. Now today we have a great many various fields one can study and become a scholar in. In the ancient world, fields of knowledge were much fewer, just a few really. One field is that of writing and texts in a society largely illiterate. Some trained to write, copy texts, access texts, interpret texts. In the bible, these are called scribes and they are associated with a temple and its religious texts and rituals. But scribes were needed for other perfunctory things as well in a non-literate society, writing contracts and bills of sale, and so on. Others observed and recorded all kinds of phenomena, with suggestions of what it means, whether it be about the new moon, or plants, or animals, or spots on a liver, or the mold growing on your house wall, or the patterns and movements of stars in the night sky.

In the course of my doctoral work, I had to write three comprehensive exams in relevant areas of scholarship, thus showing I knew that field and all the pertinent writings around that topic. My last exam was entitled "the Poetry of Prayer in the

Ancient Near East.” I expected to spend a lot of time learning about all literary texts in the ancient world, like the love poetry of Inanna, or the creation epics like Eneuma Elish and the Epic of Gilgamesh. But what I learned is that these “literary texts” that western scholars have focused on over the years, are not that well attested or represented in surviving texts. They are important, but while an archive may have one or two copies of the great creation epic Eneuma Elish, the same archive will have hundreds upon hundreds, of prayers and songs and instructions for the related rituals. And furthermore, one of the most common types of texts prevalent in archives are these compendia, listing all kinds of observations of the natural world. All kinds of phenomena, both the mundane and the unusual.

These compendia were related to rituals and prayers. Because they had an assumption, that the divine will was inscribed upon the natural world, on living bodies and plants and trees, and in the stars. And by observing these things with such closeness and care they could discern what the divine was saying through these things and know how to respond, how to pray essentially, how to participate. And so, these compendia are filled with all kinds of observations, those concerning the entrails of animals, what it means when moss grows on certain sides of rocks, about patterns of the weather and the harvest, and yes, the stars and the night sky with its movements.

In our Old Testament reading, we hear of the greatness of Solomon’s wisdom, and how do they argue for how wise Solomon was? Well for one, they say that his “wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt.” But also evidence for his wisdom lie not only in the proverbs he wrote, but also in the his songs that numbered a thousand and five, songs used in prayer and ritual. And furthermore, “He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish.” He was wise, like the scholars of the east are wise, in that he is attentive and knowledgeable in all the observable phenomena of the world.

Now why am I going on about all this? Well, it is interesting for one. And also, how often do I get to talk about animal entrails and astrology, and psalms and incantations and such? And because when Matthew wants to attest to and corroborate concerning the significance of this event of Christ entering the world, he consults the scribal evidence concerning genealogies, and he references the words of prophets telling us what would come, and he tells us that even the scholars of the east who watch the sky saw it written there, and they followed the star and they found a child born, who would be a type of King for the Jews.

Now this is all interesting to *me* for a couple reasons. One is that this business of God entering into the world through a child born to this poor couple would be easy to dismiss or overlook. And so the gospel writers go out of their way to tell us all through various kinds of evidence that this is a remarkable moment. And they are trying to convince us that this is not an ordinary child, and that God's plan this time was not ordinary either.

You see, this child is not just going to grow up into another champion, or rising king, or prophet. He is God come down, God doing a new thing. God chose to descend, to come not in power and awe, when God chose to manifest God's self not in the thunder and lightning rolling through the heavens, but in the tender cries of a newborn who must be received and cared for and nurtured into fullness. When God chose to intervene – not with armies or kings, not with dominance and force, but with love and presence, the most vulnerable and palpable presence – the presence of a king who has laid down his arms, who has laid down his force, his titles, his armor, and his exceptionalness, to come among us – to be embraced and swaddled, and to embrace us. They are working hard to point to all the evidence that calls us to pay attention to this dramatic move.

Now this is all interesting to me for a second reason, that the Magi are lifted up as a part of this story because they had been trained in the tradition of observing and watching the natural world for signs of God's presence and activity. It was observable, and they saw it. King Herod did not, and he comes off looking like a buffoon, not knowing what is happening in his own territory, his own scholars not perceiving. And furthermore, these Magi observed with an interest and a desire to know how to participate in what God is doing.

You needed to know what all these signs in the world meant so you knew how to summon God, and to know what God was up to, and what we were supposed to do to invoke God's help. And while Goat livers and incantations sound very ancient, knowing how to pray and how to ask for God's help and how to know what God is up to and how to participate, well that kind of feels quite contemporary, doesn't it?

And other than the Magi's role in corroborating the significance of Christ's coming as a babe, if they have an example for us to follow, perhaps it is to be scrupulous observers of the world, endlessly fascinated with the minutia, with an eye for discerning God's presence and activity. As one who has spent a lot of time looking at and imitating tiny flies that hatch on the water, I can see such activity as a source of wisdom. Such activity forces us to slow down and to watch closely and to be attentive. This is why I chose Mary Oliver's poem today, observation of the world as a source of wisdom in how we participate in the world.

Now I realize that compendia of random observations is not what our society values, and it may not sound very spiritual. But we might remember that while King Herod was blundering around with his agenda unaware, it was the magi who observed and who responded.

And that is a key part. Observing and looking for God's presence, not just to be a passive observer, but to respond and to participate in that presence, to get off our duffs and participate in what God is doing. Therein lies true wisdom, and may we seek it.

And all God's people said...

Fame of Solomon's Wisdom

²⁹ God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt.

³¹ He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. ³² He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. ³³ He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. ³⁴ People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he

inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

