

INTRODUCTION

For all of you who are looking for Santa this week, I need to read a memo to you.

To: All Southern USA Residents
From: Santa
RE: Replacement Santa

"I regret to inform you that effective immediately, due the growing population, I will no longer be able to serve the Southern United States on Christmas Eve. However, I have provided a replacement for you, my third cousin, Bubba Claus. His side of the family is from the South pole. There are a few differences between us that you need to know:

1. Instead of milk and cookies, Bubba Claus prefers that you leave a RC Cola and pork rinds.
2. Bubba Claus' sleigh is pulled by flying coon dogs instead of reindeer. (Santa made the mistake of loaning him a reindeer once, and his head now overlooks Bubba 's fireplace.)
3. Instead of hearing "On Comet, on Cupid, on Donner and Blitzen..." you'll hear, "On Earnhardt, on Wallace, on Gordon and Jarrett."
4. The classic Christmas movies such as "Miracle on 34th Street" and "It's a Wonderful Life" will be replaced with "Boss Hogg Saves Christmas" and "Smokey and the Bandit IV."
5. Bubba Claus doesn't wear a belt. So make sure that the wife and the kids turn the other way when he bends over to put presents under the tree.

Today as we think about Christmas I want us to revisit Bethlehem to experience the wonder and joy of the birth of Jesus through the eyes of the wise men. Let's read about it beginning in Matthew 2:

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 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, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

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.

Because the magi were following a star, I call this message “The First Star Trek:”

Jesus—the holy child. This is the journey of the ancient Magi, their continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life, and new civilizations—to boldly go where no man has gone before.”

In Nativity scenes we arrange the wise men around the baby Jesus along with the shepherds and the angels. But we know from our text the Wise Men didn’t arrive on the night of Jesus’ birth—it was later. Matthew used a word that specifically means “house” instead of stable. He also used the word “child” instead of newborn. Based upon the 16th verse in Matthew 2, we can infer Jesus was probably anywhere from 12 to 24 months old when the wise men visited Him.

We call them wise men but some women would insist that term is an oxymoron. They would rank “wise men” right up there with other pairs of contradictory words like “jumbo shrimp” or “rap music” or “civil war.” In fact, when my wife tells this story, she suggests it would have been much better if God had sent wise women instead of men. The women would have asked for directions sooner, arrived on time, helped Mary deliver the baby, and cleaned up the stable. They would have brought practical gifts like Pampers, baby-wipes, and formula.

So these moderately intelligent men were on the first Star Trek. Let’s jump on the camels with them and see if we can extract three personal lessons from their experience.

I. A DILIGENT SEARCH FOR GOD ALWAYS LEADS TO JESUS

The actual word used to describe the magi is the plural form of “magician.” Most people assume there were three of them, perhaps because they gave three different gifts to Jesus. But in spite of the song, “We three kings,” we don’t know how many there were. There could have been two, three, or sixty. We’ve heard it so long, I find myself still referring to the “three wise men.” But if you get that question while playing “Bible Trivia”, remember we don’t know how many there were!

Dr. John MacArthur writes about the importance of the magi: “Because of their combined knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, they became the most prominent and powerful group of advisors in the Medo-Persian and subsequently the Babylonian empire. Historians tell us that no Persian was ever able to become king without mastering the scientific and religious disciplines of the magi and then being approved and crowned by them.” (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, p.27)

They were from the region to the East of Israel located near modern day Iraq and Iran. They had been traveling for a long time following a strange star in the western sky. Some astronomers theorize that at this time, several planets came into alignment in relation to earth and would have created what appeared to be an extremely bright star. Others suggest it was a comet, or the emergence of a super-nova. But I think those theories ignore the key point that the scripture says

that this star *moved*– it finally stopped right over the house where Jesus was staying. I believe it was customized supernatural light.

But they weren't there just because of the star. They asked Herod, "Where is the one who has been born Messiah of the Jews?" How could they possibly know about a King being born to the Jews?

I'm convinced they read the ancient writings of Daniel. Almost six hundred years earlier Daniel had been deported as a teenager to Babylon when Jerusalem was conquered. He did more than survive a den of lions; he became a very influential leader in the kingdom. Daniel wrote his prophecies about 500 years before Jesus was born. In chapter 9 he predicted from the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the birth, life, and death of the Messiah (King of the Jews) exactly 483 years would elapse.

These magi knew exactly when Cyrus gave the official decree for Jerusalem to be rebuilt, so they simply added 483 years and that's why they were looking for a king at that particular time. They knew *when*, they just didn't know *where*. That's why they stopped by Jerusalem to ask, "Where?" The answer was found in Micah's prophecy: He would be born in Bethlehem in Judea.

The words, "Where is the Messiah?" are the first recorded words spoken by a person in the entire New Testament. (In Matthew 1, only the angel Gabriel speaks.) What do you think is the first question found in Old Testament? In Genesis 3:9, God asked Adam, "Where are you?"

Isn't the Bible amazing? In one sense, it's comprised of 66 different books written over a period of 1,500 years by different people inspired by God. But in reality, the Bible is a complete unit with a single dominating plot running from Genesis to Revelation. The entire message of the Old Testament can be summarized in the question God asks sinful mankind, "Where are you?" Like Adam, each of us must admit we have failed to live up to God's standard.

Compare that to the message of the New Testament. Instead of a Holy God asking sinful mankind, "Where are you?" A man is asking, "Where is God?" And God answers the question unequivocally, "I took on human flesh and came into the world at Bethlehem in Judea!"

It hasn't changed in 2,000 years. People are still searching for God, asking, "Where are You?" They may ask, "Where was God on 9/11?" Or "Where was God when my child died?" Each of us must ask and answer that question, "Where—or Who—is the Messiah?"

If you honestly, seriously seek to find God, you will always be led to Jesus. The Bible says, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ..." "He is the image of the invisible God...for God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things." (1 Timothy 2:5; Colossians 1:15, 29)

I love the story of the little kids in Sunday School who were given the freedom to stage their own impromptu Christmas pageant. The teachers read the story and provided some props; then they stood to the side and let the kids dramatize it on their own. One girl grabbed the doll and said, "I'll be Mary." Another said, "I'll be Joseph," some scampered for the bathrobes and said, "I'll

be a shepherd." Everyone was either a lamb, or a wise man, or an angel or something else. One little girl had no part, so she said, "I'll be the doctor who delivered the baby Jesus." So they all took their places. Mary had a sofa pillow under her shirt as Joseph led her before the mean innkeeper who sent them away. When the time came, the "doctor" took the doll from Mary's pillow and held it up. Joseph, wanting to act like a new papa said, "What is it, doc?" The little doctor smiled and said, "Why it's a...God." Correct.

So, the magi searched for God—and they found Jesus. You will, too. The next lesson we see is:

II. IF YOU ARE WISE, GIVE HIM YOUR TREASURE

One of the most enjoyable things about Christmas is giving gifts to others. It would be nice to think we got the idea from the wise men.

Sometimes what we give and receive during this season aren't truly gifts at all. They are just exchanges. You could call them gifts-for-gifts. That's when you give a gift because someone has given you a gift and you calculate about how much the gift was worth that they gave you so you can spend roughly the same amount on their gift. If you've ever said, "I gave someone a great gift and all they gave me was this" or "Since they didn't give me a gift last year, I won't give them a gift this year" then you don't truly understand the nature of a gift.

A real gift always is motivated by love. For God so loved He gave...The phrase "gift exchange" is actually an oxymoron, but the phrase "love gift" is a redundancy. Love always gives. "You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving."

Some Christmas gifts are inappropriate. For instance, if you have little toddlers in your family, you probably DON'T want to give them permanent markers as a Christmas gift! That would be an inappropriate gift! But the gifts of the magi were perfect. The great Bible expositor, John Stott, confirms these gifts were not accidental: these men were so wise that their gifts even teach us about Jesus. He wrote: "Gold is the gift fit for a King. Frankincense was in constant use by the priests in the temple. Myrrh was used to embalm the dead. In those three gifts we see who He is, what He came to do, and what it would cost Him."

If you are truly wise, you'll open your treasure and give Jesus some valuable gifts as well.

1. Gold—Give Him your first and best

Gold has always been one of the most valuable commodities on earth. Kings received gold as tribute. When you make Jesus the Lord of your life, it means He is your King. This involves much more than financial giving, but the amount of gold you give to the Lord does reveal whether He is your King. Many folks want to give to God, but each month, they pay all their bills and spend on themselves and then if any is leftover, they give God some of it. He deserves your first not your leftovers. Proverbs 3:9 says to honor the Lord with your wealth by giving him the first fruits of your income.

Each Christmas I encourage you to give your most expensive Christmas present to Jesus by giving to World Missions. That's a real love gift because the people who benefit from your gift can't give you a gift in return. Your blessing will come when you meet some people in heaven who say, "Thank you for giving to the Lord—I am a life that was changed." Jesus deserves your gold.

2. Incense—Give Him your joyous worship

In verse 10, it says the magi were "overjoyed." Eugene Petersen paraphrases it in *The Message*, "they could hardly contain themselves." Their joy was expressed as they bowed down and worshiped the Child.

Incense was used in the temple by priests. They burned the incense so worship would be an experience that affected all the senses. The cloud created by the incense represented the presence of God that was revealed as a cloud that led Israelites to the Promised land. The incense produced a unique odor people only associated with worship. We also associate smells with certain experiences. To this day, when Cindy puts on a pot of turnip greens to cook all afternoon it reminds me of visiting my grandmother's house as a child.

Incense speaks of the joy of worship. Like the wise men, when we bow before Jesus, there should be so much joy that "we can hardly contain ourselves." Many people come to church, but they never truly worship. They just listen as the songs are sung, or they sing them without thinking about the words, or striving to sing to God. Worship is all about giving, and I'm not just talking about the offering. Have you ever heard a Christian complain, "I came to church and I didn't GET anything out of it?" That's the problem. We aren't here primarily to "get" something. We're here to give, so give praise to God, give a hug to someone who needs one, or give encouragement to a hurting brother or sister.

3. Myrrh—Your life and loyalty

Myrrh was an ointment used on dead bodies to retard decay. This gift reveals that the Magi understood the death of the Messiah would be significant. Daniel wrote of the Messiah being "cut off" or killed. The Christmas song, "Mary did you know" is one of my favorites, but I don't think there's anyway Mary could know her child was born to die. How could she know that those chubby little hands would be torn open by huge nails? How could she know His tiny side, that pulsed with every heartbeat as He slept, would be ripped by a Roman spear?

At the end of His earthly life, one of the thieves dying with Him looked ahead and believed Jesus was a King who would live. That took faith! But what faith it must have taken for the magi to demonstrate during the first days of His life that this child was a King who would die!

The myrrh represents the need for us to offer Him our lives because He was willing to die for us. When you die to self and lose your life in following Him, you demonstrate He is the King of your life.

The final Star Trek lesson is:

III. ONCE YOU'VE MET HIM, YOU CAN'T GO HOME THE SAME WAY YOU CAME

God warned the magi in a dream to go home a different way. Not only did they return by a different route, but they also went back home as different men. When you truly encounter Jesus Christ and recognize Who He is, you'll never again be same. Will you go home a different person from having encountered the living Christ today? I don't mean taking Old Bullard Road home instead of Broadway. I'm talking about being a changed person. Once you meet Jesus, your life takes on a new direction. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

One of the greatest minds of the 20th century was the poet, T.S. Eliot. In 1948 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Although he was born in America, he spent most of his life in England and later became a British citizen. In his search for truth he became a cynical humanist, and edited a magazine with the pretentious title, "The Egotist." In many of his early poems, Eliot used his saber sharp wit to ridicule Christianity. He wasn't just picking on Christianity however, he poked fun at other sacred topics as well, including English High Tea! Eliot described his poetry as "rhythmic grumbling." Later, he immersed himself into various religions including, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism searching for spiritual truth.

In 1927, at the age of 39, Eliot turned to Christ after seriously studying the Bible. He was baptized, and like C.S. Lewis, he became one of the greatest spokesmen for the intellectual viability of Christianity. Until a few months ago, I wasn't a fan of his poetry because he generally wrote free verse and I prefer simple poetry that rhymes ("Whose woods these are I think I know..."). In contrast, you must read Eliot's lines several times to understand any meaning hiding there. After he came to Christ, his style remained the same, but his outlook was changed. He went home a different way. Even secular scholars recognize the stark difference between his writings before and after his conversion.

Not long after becoming a Christian, Eliot disguised his personal testimony in his poem, "The Journey of the Magi." In it, Eliot writes as one of the wise men reflecting back on that life-changing quest. He is really writing about his own spiritual quest. Pay attention because this will make a great topic for some of you college kids to write a term paper on or even a Master's thesis!

The poem begins, "A hard time we had of it. / At the end we preferred to travel all night, / Sleeping in snatches, / With the voices in our ears, saying / That this was all folly...(And when you honestly search for God, the world will say you're foolish)

He writes later, "Then we came to a tavern with vine leaves over the lintel (a reference to the Passover Lamb whose life giving blood placed on the lintel is like new wine) / Six hands over an open door dicing for silver. / And feet kicking the empty wineskins, / But there was no information, and so we continued / (the failure of money and empty religion to satisfy - but he kept searching.)

And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon / Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory (relatively late in life, Eliot arrived at the truth about Jesus)

I don't have space to repeat the entire poem, but he concludes by admitting that his old way of living had to die because it was rendered worthless when He encountered Christ. His new birth was also the death of his old self. He wrote, "I had seen birth and death, / But had thought they were different; this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death."

I'm not smart enough to presume to know everything an intellectual giant like T.S. Eliot meant in that beautiful poem. But to a simple guy like me, he was saying, "Like the wise men, I searched a long time for the truth about God. When I finally discovered Jesus, I found the truth that changed my life."

CONCLUSION

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are?" Stars have always fascinated us. They are more than just "balls of gas burning billions of miles away" as Pumba says in the "Lion King". Have you ever gazed into the twilight sky and whispered, "Star bright, star light, first star I see tonight; I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight?"

What about your Star Trek? Are you wishing and searching for something like the Magi, and like T.S. Eliot? You may call it searching for ultimate truth, or searching for purpose or meaning in life, or searching for happiness or peace or you may not know WHAT you are searching for. Whatever it is, I can promise you if you seek diligently for God, there WILL be a star that leads you to Jesus. As John Hopkins wrote in his song, "Star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light."

Wise men still seek Jesus. Your star may not appear in the sky. Since that first Star Trek, God mostly uses people as His stars to lead others to Jesus. My mother was the star God used to guide me to Jesus over 40 years ago. Who knows? God might have placed me here today to be your star. The main reason for my existence is to guide people to Jesus. Wise Men still seek Him. But the magi weren't wise because they were *seeking* Jesus, we call them wise today because they *found* Jesus. If you seek Him today, you can find Him.

If you are a Christian, you may be thinking, "That's great! I hope someone reading this is guided to Jesus, but what truth is there for me in this passage? I've already met Jesus, bowed before Him and given Him my worship." Here's the application for you: God wants to use you as His star. Who do you know in your Universe who needs to be guided to Jesus? The Bible says, "and those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars for ever and ever." (Daniel 12:3) Go out there and take a starring role in leading people to Jesus!

OUTLINE

I. A DILIGENT SEARCH FOR GOD ALWAYS LEADS TO JESUS

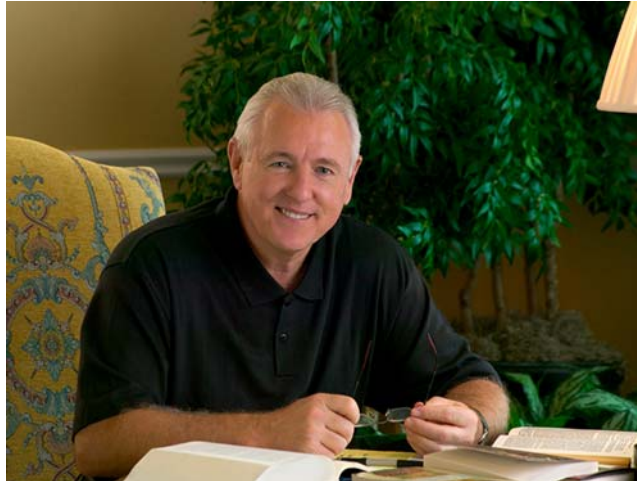
"For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ..." "He is the image of the invisible God...for God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things." *1 Timothy 2:5; Colossians 1:15, 29*

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes