

Text: Matthew 2:1-12
Title: "Magnetic!"

All around the world today...in cities, towns. All across this nation...in every part of greater Vancouver...men and women, boys and girls...of every ethnic, economic, educational background...are experiencing what feels like something or someone "pulling at" the core of their being. Seemingly "out of nowhere" they are experiencing a gentle, but powerful sense, that they ought to stop what they are doing, and fall to their knees in worship. You have experienced this a number of times if only for a fleeting moment. Why?

The story we just read, the story about the wise men and the star, gives one possible explanation. We know the story well. Or do we? No sooner had Jesus been born when strange things began to happen. "Seismic" things. Matthew 2, verse 3 "and Herod was greatly troubled" by the presence of the wise men. The verb Matthew uses is "seismazdo", from where we get the English word "Seismic". Who are these wise men? Matthew calls them "magi"

The Bible uses the term "magi" both negatively and positively. It is used in the negative sense of those who had the ability to interpret dreams and visions. Daniel – of Daniel and the lions' den – was called by this term (Daniel 1:10; 2:2; 4:4; 5:7). Matthew is using the word in the positive sense. He is referring to learned men from an Eastern country – Iran or Iraq – who genuinely sought after truth, and they thought, which they thought could be found in the study of the stars. These un-named magi, these astrologers, saw something in the eastern sky that made them want to stop what they were doing and travel thousands of miles across the desert to worship.

What did they see? We are not sure. Craig Chester – the director of the Institute of Research in Astronomy, in Monterey, California, writes: "It is safe to say that every astronomical event known to have occurred between 7 BC and 1 BC has at some point been proposed as the Bethlehem star" Astronomers tells us that in the years around the birth of Jesus, the skies were busy with all kinds of "impressive" phenomenon (Chester). And much of it can now be re-animated for us on computer screens. Google "Bethlehem star" later today and see what I mean.

Some suggest that what the magi saw was a new comet, something like Halley's comet. Computer models, however, have not detected any comets out of the ordinary for that period of time. Others suggest that what the magi saw was a super-nova, some kind of exploding star. Again, however models have not detected anything out of the ordinary. And, says Matthew, 'whatever they saw, it appeared twice (2:2; 2:9). No one has yet witnessed the same super-nova exploding twice.

Others suggest that what the magi saw was a phenomenon involving the planet Jupiter. In ancient cosmology, Persian, Greek and Roman – Jupiter was the star whose appearance signaled the time was right for a new king to arise. In 6 BC Jupiter underwent two eclipses by the moon, what astronomers call "occultations". (On April 2, 6 BC Jupiter appeared "in the east" early in the morning. It was then eclipsed by the moon. In August of 6 BC Jupiter seemed to have stopped moving. It then began to

travel across the constellation Aries – which stood for the west, and in particular Judea – and then seemed to stop again on Dec. 19, 6 BC).

In the spring of 6 BC, Jupiter appeared very close to Venus in the early morning sky (of the northern hemisphere). Then in the summer and autumn Jupiter appeared very close to Saturn, and did so in the constellation of the Fishes (or Pisces). (In 1604 the great astronomer Kepler witnessed this phenomenon. Dr. Karles Kaufmann of University of Minnesota argues it did happen twice there in 7 or 6 BC). In the worldview of Eastern astronomers Jupiter was associated with the Ruler of the universe, Saturn was associated with Palestine, and the constellation of the Fishes with the East days. If Jupiter encountered Saturn in the sign of the Fishes, it could only mean that the Ruler of the last days, the King of the universe, would appear somewhere in the West, most likely Palestine (E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story*, 31).

And some suggest that what the magi saw was a single star, supernaturally placed in the sky, to win those truth-seekers. A star that arose for that one purpose. Given who the Living God is, given that He simply spoke the stars into whirling space... and, according to Isaiah, knows them all by name... God could have brought a special star into being just to announce the birth of a new King, the great King, the King of Kings. "The heavens are telling the glory of God," says the Psalmist (19:11).

Could not the heavens then be used by God to announce the birth of the true King of heaven and earth? Is that why Matthew calls the star "His" star?

Whatever the star was, the magi "got the message". A new King had been born! And so they embark on the long journey in search of "the Ruler of the universe."

When they finally arrive in Palestine, they go to the most logical place where such a Person would be born. They go to Jerusalem, to what was called "the city of the King." There they learn that the Jews were expecting a King, who was to be born in Bethlehem, a village five miles south of Jerusalem. The magi embrace the Biblical word, and head off for Bethlehem. In Bethlehem they find the One they were looking for and fell before Him in worship.

What is going on in this story? Something very profound.

But in order to see what Matthew sees, we need to set aside the picture of this event created in our imaginations by our Christian traditions, especially by the traditions that come to us in Christmas carols and Christmas cards. Not that the tradition is all wrong. It is just that the tradition misses the profound point Matthew is making.

It seems to me that most people have the following picture in mind. They see magi from the East being led.... being led by a star across the Arabian desert to Palestine. right? The star is in front of them in the West, step-by-step, leading them westwards. After they arrive in Jerusalem, they learn that they need to go south, to Bethlehem. They are then led by the star to Bethlehem. There the star further leads them... to the specific neighborhood, and to the specific house where the newborn King lives. Right? So we sing: "Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to they perfect light." Westward leading. Guide us.

But is that the picture Matthew intends to create in our imaginations? Is Matthew's emphasis on the star "leading" the wise men? Yes, the magi do follow the message of the star. But nowhere does Matthew say "the star led the wise men."

Look carefully at the actual words Matthew uses. Listen.

Verse 2: The magi say "we saw His star in the East, and have come to worship Him." In the East, they do not say what we tend to make them say, namely, "while in the East we saw His star in the West and have followed it to this place." "We saw His star in the East"... they were looking the other way... away from Palestine.... they were looking Eastward.

Verse 7: Herod wants to know "what time the star appeared." If the star had appeared in the West, that is, over Palestine, Herod would have certainly seen it. And he would not have needed to ask the question. Certainly his wise men would have already noticed such a phenomenon.

Verse 9: After the wise men hear Herod and his advisors, Matthew says they went on their way. And then he says, the star "which they had seen in the East, went out before them, until it came and stood where the child was." Again, we read into that sentence the word "lead". But is that what Matthew intends us to understand?

Verse 10: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." It seems that the wise men were surprised to see the star. The implication being that they had not seen it for some time.

The picture, or storyline, Matthew intends to create in our imagination is this: While in an Eastern country the wise see a star in the East, a new star. They make certain deductions from the star that led them to turn around and travel thousands of miles in the other direction to Palestine. As they travel they are not being led by the star. The star is still in the East, "behind them" if you will. When they get to Palestine, they go to the most logical place, to Jerusalem to the Royal City. Note: Matthew does not say the other star led them to Jerusalem. It's their deduction, and the trade route, that led them to the city of the King. In Jerusalem they find out, from the Scriptures, that the King whose coming they deduced from the star, is to be born in Bethlehem. So they begin the five-mile journey to the south. Note: Matthew says they do so in response to the new data gained from Scripture. They were not, at the beginning of the five-mile journey, following the star. The star was still "behind them", in the East.

Then something strange (seismic) occurs... while making the trip to Bethlehem. They noticed that the star which they had seen in the East showed up! "It went before them" says Matthew, verse 9 - "until it came to the house" where Jesus was "and stood over" the house. The star showed up! All of a sudden. It too was going to Bethlehem. Not only toward the village... Not only toward the neighborhood... but to the very place where the Child was... and stood right over it.

What is going on here?

I think it is this... and it is profound. The star was not guiding the wise men. Again, Matthew never uses the word "guide" or "lead". That idea is brought into the story by

the carols and cards. Yes, the wise men were following the message of the star. But the star itself was not leading.

Then what was the star doing? It was following! Following! The star was following! Or more precisely, it was being pulled, drawn in.

Look at Matthew 2:9 again. Listen very carefully. "And having heard the King (i.e. Herod), they went on their way; and Lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them..." See the word "lo"? Hear the word "lo"? We who have grown up in the English Bible have gotten so used to it, that we no longer really see or hear it. Some versions even leave it out! "Lo", or "behold", is the imperative form of the verb to see. It is a command. Look! Look! Look!

In telling the story Matthew is struck again by the wonder of it. Look! Look! The star... the one they saw in the East... which they had not seen for years... moved ahead of them. The star moved! That conjunction of planets, that configuration of stellar bodies, that supernatural star... whatever it was, moved; traveled south. Stars do not move southward!

The magi were traveling from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. When they started out they were not following the star. They had found the Scriptures, the Word of God. Who needs a star when you have the Word? Who needs astrology when you have the Bible? They were following the message of the prophet Micah: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler..." (2b). The magi were making their way to Bethlehem... when all of a sudden ... Lo! Look! Look! Look! The star they had seen in the East "went behind them." It too was traveling to Bethlehem!! We assume it was guiding the magi to where Jesus was. Is that what Matthew says? No. The magi no longer needed stars. The magi were surprised to see the star. As Matthew says, "when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (2:10). They had not expected to see the star. Why should they? They had left it in the East. Look! The star!

Are you with me? The star was not guiding anyone. The star was there because it was being **pulled, drawn in**. By what? By whom? By the Baby! By the infant Jesus!

But of course! Of course! Ought not the presence of the Creator-as-creature have some kind of effect on the cosmos when He enters creation in Person? If the Lord of the universe has appeared on earth, ought not the created order somehow recognize Him and respond?

Matthew is holding before us, right at the beginning of the story, the magnetic power of Jesus Christ. As Jesus Himself would later say: "If I be lifted up I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). There He is just an infant... a helpless infant... and already He is drawing grown men and stars to Himself!

Listen again to the text... to the text, not to the tradition. Verse 2:1 "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold" – there's that word again – look! "Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?'" Look! Wise men! Matthew is surprised...

startled. Jesus has only just been born and already people from other nations are coming. Already the in-gathering is happening! Was Matthew thinking of Isaiah 60? "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you... Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawning." They came to Jesus the Light by a message discerned from the star... and then by the word of God.

Listen again to the text... to the text of verse 2:9: "And having heard the King, they went on their way, and lo" – Look! Look! – "the star which they had seen in the East went before them." It too was going to see the king! Indeed the star was outrunning the magi! Creation knows what Christmas is all about... even if the culture does not, Creation gets it!

The Russian poet-novelist Boris Pasternak (of *Dr. Zhivago* fame) seemed to have grasped what Matthew is trying to say with his carefully chosen words. In his poem "The Christmas Star," Pasternak tells of the visit of the magi (Earl Palmer brought my attention to this work). Let me read a few stanzas of the poem before reading the key line:

"Rose like a blazing stack of straw,
The sight of the new star startled the universe,
...
Its reddened glow was a sign:
the three star-gazers
Hurried to the call
of its unprecedented light.
Day was breaking. The dawn swept the remaining stars
Like cinders from the sky.
Out of all the great gathering Mary allowed
Only the wise men through the opening in the rock.
He slept in the oak manger,
Radiant as moonlight in the hollow of a tree.
Instead of sheepskin,
The lips of the ass and the nostrils of the ox kept him warm.
The Magi stood in the shadow,
Whispering, scarcely finding words. [*Here's the key line*]
**All at once, a hand stretched out of the dark,
Moved one of them aside to the left of the manger.
He looked around, Gazing at the Virgin from the doorway,
Like a guest, was the Christmas Star."**

Isn't that powerful? "Gazing at the Virgin from the doorway, like a guest, was the Christmas Star." The star had been drawn in by the magnetic power of the Incarnate Creator lying in Mary's arms.

Profound stuff.

Look! Magi from the East come. And look! The star which they had seen in the East and left behind in the East also came.

And, says Matthew, there was joy. Lots of joy! (Vs. 10) Matthew piles up phrases to express what the magi felt. "Rejoiced" would be sufficient. But no, he says, "rejoiced with joy." More than that... "rejoiced with great joy." More than that! -- "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Someone has said that joy is the emotion that says, "I'm home!", "This is it", "This is what I was made for."

And there was worship – lots of worship (Vs. 11). "And going into the house they saw the child with His mother Mary, and they fell down and worshipped Him." (2:11) What a scene! Grown men, educated men, wealthy men, scientists, scholars... on their knees before a Child! But of course! What more appropriate response when you find the magnetic center of life? And with the whole self – "they fell down." They worshipped with their bodies as well as with their minds. Not only does Jesus draw us to Himself, He also, as Dale Bruner puts it, draws out of us what according to the Old Testament only the Living God can rightly draw out of us (in *The Christbook*, p. 50). They worshipped him.

And there was the opening of treasure boxes! "And opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh." (2:11). Of course! What else can we do? He is the great King. He is the Lord of the universe. He is our Maker and Savior and Friend. "Here Jesus... here are my treasures." Gold – a most appropriate gift for royalty. Frankincense – the incense of worship – a most appropriate gift for Deity. Myrrh – embalming spice – a most appropriate gift for a King who comes to suffer with and die for His people in order to set them free.

And there was a change in direction (Vs. 12). "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way" (2:12). I agree with those who argue that in Matthew's gospel the word "way" is used with theological, ethical overtones. Jesus will say in His Sermon on the Mount, "the way is the bread that leads to destruction and many are on it... but the way is narrow that leads to life and few are those who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). Matthew is telling us that when we find the magnetic center of life there is great joy... and there is a change in direction. We begin to move in orbit around Him. We begin to travel "another way," the way of the Kingdom of God, the way of the new creation, the way of the cross, the way of peace.

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, look! Wise men from the East came... and look! the star which they had seen in the East went before them." All pulled in by the magnetic power of the Lover of our souls.

In light of this story I better understand what happened to me when I was in fifth grade. We were living in Los Alamos, New Mexico, where my dad was doing Physics for the University of California. It was a Sunday morning. Our Sunday School teacher did not show up that day; so all of us fifth grade boys were sent into the sanctuary for the worship service. There we were... all in a row... thirteen or fourteen fifth grade boys. Can you imagine that? I remember the day as though it were last Sunday. The preacher was talking about Jesus of Nazareth. I do not remember anything he said about Jesus. But I do remember, and can feel even now, the joy as he spoke. At one point he said, "You know, you can know Jesus yourself. You can meet Him today. I

can introduce you to Him right now. Just get out of your seat and come down here to the front of the sanctuary.”

I was sitting in the middle of the pew... fifth grade boys on either side of me. I looked to my right – none of them were moving. I looked to my left – none of them were moving either. Yet I was being pulled – drawn in. Not by the preacher... but by Someone bigger than the preacher. I could not resist. I tried. But I could not resist. So I got up. Went forward. And the next thing I knew I was kneeling and a beam of light streamed through one of the stained glass windows. And I knew I was home.

It is happening all over the world today. And will tomorrow. And Tuesday. The Magnetic centre of life pulling, pulling, pulling, pulling.

Can you feel it? Can you feel Him drawing you ... to Himself... closer and closer to Himself... deeper and deeper into Himself? I am discovering that much of the frustration we experience in life is due to resisting the pull. Thank God, we can resist just so long. The amazing thing about the Christmas story is that people like Herod and the scribes were able to resist as long as they did.

He is pulling. He is drawing us. Let go. And like the magi... and the star!.. **Come home.**