

Second Sunday After Christmas  
January 2, 2011

### **A Star to Find a Savior**

Christmas Eve always leaves me speechless. Perhaps it's sentimental nostalgia or the smell of evergreens in the air; but there's something powerful that happens on a cold and wintry night in December. The wreaths and poinsettias are hung in downtown shopping plazas and in friend's homes, the beauty radiating in hues of red and green. The church choirs are dressed in their robes and singing wonderful harmonies. The Christmas tree is lit up with lights and ornaments and there are presents placed under the tree.

And the church is surrounded by the people you love and who love you and wish to offer you the Good News of great joy on that star-filled night.

And if this was all, it would be enough.

But something happens that very night that is strikingly different from most nights. The world seems to finally hush; there's a sense of peace in the air. The light posts that line the downtown of my small town seem to glimmer brighter that night. The Light of the World and the light of the stars shine in one accord. And that very night, I sing Silent Night with joy, proclaiming the "Holy Infant" who was "Lord at Thy Birth."

New Years Eve has a different tone for me; it is anything but quiet. The lights this night come from an array of fireworks and LED glasses that shimmer "2011." We watch TV, maybe make some resolutions, and enjoy time with family and friends. It's a beautiful night of celebration.

And it all comes to culminate as we hold our breath as the Dick Clark counts down the last few seconds of 2010; we are standing on the edge of the end and a new beginning.

The Magi stood on the edge as well; the end of an old way of life – of the sin and perils of pain and on the edge of something brand new – the beginning of a new life.

There has been anticipation for Christmas and New Years. We have walked through advent: for four weeks we gather and prepare our hearts, we dare to imagine a world that embraces a Messiah, and we hope and pray for a new life that begins with a little baby boy.

And we have also longed for New Years Eve; a chance to begin again: to wipe off the slate and change for the better. In the simple turn of a calendar page, we have the chance to make this year better than the last.

For many children (and adults, you know who you are) – we count down the days until we can celebrate the holiday season. For some, it seems like it goes too fast, especially when the presents aren't wrapped or the cookies aren't baked, but for some it seems like ages away and the days seem to go slower. But when we look back, before the time of Mary and Joseph and a small child in a manger, we see people longing for months, years, and generations for a Savior. We see people who were longing to stand on the edge of death and new life; people longing for a chance to begin again. Our four weeks of Advent is a small blip on the screen compared to the generations of Abraham and David who dreamt of a Messiah that would offer them redemption.

And I wonder if they doubted that a Messiah would come; if they thought that this might be the one promise in which God wouldn't follow through. Maybe they imagined that all their praying, hoping, and dreaming was for nothing.

And so enter the Magi who dare to believe the unbelievable.

The Magi, who were literate political leaders from the East, knew the words of the prophet Micah who said that there would, "come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." [Mic 5:2]. The term Magi, comes from the Greek word *magoi*, which can be better translated as astrologer; and so it seems only natural that God would choose these men to follow a star to find a Savior.

When the three men came upon the manger, we read in Matthew that they are "overwhelmed with joy" [Mt 2:10]. They find the "King of the Jews" and the "Savior of the world" in a little baby boy that lies in a cradle. They offer gifts that are only proper for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And when they offered their gifts, they go back to their homeland, but by a different road.

I ask you to imagine the experience of the Magi and the three ways in which this experience must have given them exceeding joy that would simply leave them speechless: [1] their hopes and dreams for a Savior realized in their own lifetime, [2] their Salvation and redemption found in an infant born in a stable, and [3] the chance to let this experience change their lives forever.

*The unbelievable became a reality in their lifetime*

Israel had been hoping for this moment: someone to bear their sin, someone to shepherd them back to wholeness, someone to let them begin again. We find these desires throughout the prophecies of the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah. The words of Isaiah proclaim someone who was "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the punishment that made us whole, and by His bruises we are healed" [Isa 53:5]. This, Isaiah says, will be a sign from the Lord, a "young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name Him Immanuel" [Isa 7:14] and "authority [will] rest upon His shoulders; and He [will be called] Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" [Isa 9:6].

These are words that the Magi knew well; the words of their forefathers who prophesied about a man who will bring great joy and great peace to a world that lived in destruction. The Magi, who were fortunate enough to lead lives as elite leaders from the East, knew about the anguish that surrounded them in their land: lives that were riddled with pain, with lust, with despair, with injustice, with hatred, and anger. It was a land that may or may not have followed the letter of the law, but they were leaps and bounds away from reflecting a heart of justice or a soul of compassion.

So when the Magi received the dream that they would follow a star to find a Savior, they must have been speechless. A reality that they were hoping for, and generations before them, would be realized in their own lifetime. They traveled out into a land of the unknown by the guiding of a single star and faith - and as they traveled, they must have felt a sense of the ethereal in the air: a sense of an unreality becoming a reality.

As the Magi sojourn out in a land in which they follow a glimmering light that will tell them the way, we take a similar leap of faith as we reach out to experience

Christ. We follow the glimmering words of Scripture to guide us to an incredible Savior and when we take the leap of faith, we find ourselves experiencing our similarly spell-binding and speechless moment at the throne of grace.

This leap of faith is required to enter into the presence of the One that leaves you awestruck. We must seek something more, though it may be simple words on a page, to lead us to the experience of really grappling with the Savior's heart for us. We must allow ourselves to be led in unexpected ways, for it may just be one bright star over the night sky that leads us to our Savior and reminds us of the incredible magnitude of God. And as we experience the graciousness and greatness of God, the Magi experience it too, finding their salvation in an unconventional place.

*The Magi found Salvation in a little baby boy*

As the star stops over a manger on a silent Bethlehem night, they found themselves experience incredible joy – the kind of joy, I sense, that leaves you spellbound and quiet. The Magi knew through prophecy that the Savior would be born of a young woman and the child would be named Immanuel, but I would imagine it is still is a complicated image for them to take in. How will a child not born of royalty have the esteem to change anything in this world? How will this child defeat the powers of Herod and the rulers of this land and bear our sins? How do we know that this is He, the Savior, Immanuel?

But as all these questions would be going through their mind, they fall hush by the power of the presence of what is before them. An infant boy, born of a virgin in a small stable, and the sense that something incredible and life changing is before them; in their paralysis, they take the leap of the faith. They not only offer gifts - the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – but they offered themselves and their belief. They give the gifts in silence, overcome by joy and overcome by hope. They have experienced and witnessed the birth of new life.

And though you and I have heard the story many times, I wonder how often we are thrown by this expression of Christ as a small baby. I often wonder why God did not choose a strong, burly man to fiercely walk into the lives of those who were doing wrong. I wonder why Jesus wasn't a powerful political leader who would wield His human power to forcibly change the mainstream culture. And I cannot help but to consider why a stable, rather than a strong palace, for the Savior who would create such change in the lives of many.

But God enters in the unexpected and mysterious. Instead of power and strength, God chose innocence and gentleness. Instead of fierceness and boldness, God chose humility and kindness. Instead of force and brutality, God chose peacefulness and compassion. God chose for you and me a Savior that reflected what God desired for us: a life lived in purity, kindness, and peacefulness. A life that abides in such joy and hope, that we are left in speechless gratitude.

*They left by a different road and their life was changed forever*

And after the Magi offer their gratitude to their Savior, they chose to leave by a different road. We are told that the Magi, who have “been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, left for their own country by another road” [Mt 2:12] for the fear that

Herod would require the Magi to tell him where the Christ was born. But I believe this could speak an even deeper metaphorical meaning; the Magi journeyed away from Herod, a man whose heart only desired evil and destruction, and after seeing Jesus and experiencing the life-giving speechlessness that surrounds hope and new life, they had to depart a different way. The Magi were moved to look at life differently after seeing what life could be and what life would come to mean with the Savior in their midst. They traveled back to their home country, by a different road and in a different mindset.

And that is the way with Christ, isn't it? When we experience and encounter Christ in our own hearts, something has changed. We are no longer the same person we were before the encounter; yes, we might look the same, but something very different has happened within our hearts. And alike the Magi, we may go back to our own homes after we experience Christ, but our reality is starkly different. We long to live lives that reflect the grace, compassion, and love that Jesus has offered to us; in some way, we long to be a small part of Christ here on Earth; we long for something more.

And so, the hustle and the bustle of the holiday season has drawn to a close; with the parties over and the holiday treats devoured. It could be easy to let this Christmastime go by and be unchanged, but I caution you not to forget the story of the Magi; the Magi who have experienced overwhelming joy and speechless gratitude for a Savior here on Earth. A Savior who was longed for by generations, who came to reign in the embodiment of humility as an infant babe, and One who leaves lives changed and blessed forever. This child, Immanuel, has come to be born in our hearts not for a day or for a short season, but has come to reign in our lives everyday and forever more, amen.

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