

their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

There was a piano teacher known as “Herman.” One night at a university concert, a distinguished pianist suddenly became ill while performing an extremely difficult piece. He had to leave the stage. Herman rose from his seat in the audience, walked onstage, sat down at the piano and with great mastery completed the performance. Later that evening, at a party, one of the students asked Herman how he was able to perform such a demanding piece so beautifully without notice and with no rehearsal. He replied, “In 1939, when I was a budding young concert pianist, I was arrested and placed in a Nazi concentration camp. Putting it mildly, the future looked bleak. But I knew that in order to keep the flicker of hope alive that I might someday play again, I needed to practice every day. I began by fingering a piece from my repertoire on my bare board bed late one night. The next night I added a second piece and soon I was running through my entire repertoire. I did this every night for five years. It so happens that the piece I played tonight at the concert hall was part of that repertoire. That constant practice is what kept my hope alive. Everyday I renewed my hope that I would one day be able to play my music again on a real piano, and in freedom.

God calls and guides. He puts home in our hearts, but we must do all we can to keep that hope alive.

Rom 5:1 - 5 ¹Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ²Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

CONCLUSION

We stand at the beginning of a New Year. What will it bring? We are wishing one another, *Happy New Year*. We have probably said we hope it will be better than last year. All we can do is go forward in hope; looking to Jesus, open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, walking in ways known and to be made known.

NEW BABY, NEW VISITORS, NEW YEAR Matthew 2:1-18

INTRODUCTION

Who were the Wise Men in the long ago?
Not Herod, fearful lest he lose his throne;
Not Pharisees too proud to claim their own;
Not priest and scribes whose province was to know;
Not money-changers running to and fro;
But three who traveled, weary and alone,
With dauntless faith, because before them shone
The Star that lead them to a manger low.

Who are the Wise Men now, when all is told?
Not men of science; not the great and strong;
Not those who wear a kingly diadem;
Not those whose eager hands pile high the gold;
But those amid the tumult and the throng
Who follow still the Star of Bethlehem. (B. Y. Williams)

TESTIMONY (We have seen his star)

It is very important to tell what we know. How did Joseph know how to behave in Egypt? When his master’s wife tried to seduce him he told her it was wrong. A slave could have been flattered by the advances of an attractive woman. Jacob must have been a good father in respect of teaching his son about the Almighty and right from wrong. Why was Ruth so insistent that she go back to Israel with Naomi? Naomi’s son, Mahlon, Ruth’s husband and Naomi herself must have told Ruth about the Lord God of Israel. Ruth wanted to stay with Naomi, go with Naomi and serve Naomi’s God. The man who had been possessed by demons and lived among the tombs wanted to go with Jesus when Jesus cast the demons out of the man. Jesus sent the man back to his home and ordered him to tell people what God had done for him. Among the last words Jesus spoke as he ascended into heaven was to his disciples, **You will be my witnesses.**

Now, on to the stage of history come wise men from the east telling what they know, testifying to their experience.

Matt 2:2 ²saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

The wise men most likely came from Babylon or Persia – the area where the Jews had been taken into Exile. There were wise men – magi

– in Babylon in the time of Daniel. They were interested in dreams, astrology (astronomy) and magic. Some were only charlatans, but others were honest inquirers after the truth. Many Jews remained in these areas even after the Persians allowed them to return to Judah. As scholars, the wise men would have known about the Jewish Scriptures and may even have been familiar with them. They would have known the prophecy of Balaam (who came from the eastern mountains):

*Num 24:17*¹⁷ ... a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

As star-gazers this prophecy would have been of particular interest to them. Associating a star with a scepter pointed to royalty. A scepter is a symbolic ornamental rod borne in the hand by a ruling monarch as an item of royal or imperial insignia. The Jews believed that Balaam's prophecy pointed to the Messiah. For the wise men who had observed the star and knew it was associated with the scepter it could mean only one thing. The King of the Jews has been born. They told what they knew, what their learning and experience had led them to. They gave their testimony, they bore their witness. All who come close to Jesus need to do the same. How did you hear of him? How did you meet him? Make it known. Pass it on

FACT (The King has come)

Christians have a lot to say about *faith*. There is nothing wrong in that. We must also be just as big on *fact*.

A pastor was speaking to his people on the relationship between fact and faith. He said, "That you are sitting before me in this church—is fact. That I am standing here, speaking from this pulpit—is fact. That I believe anyone is listening to me—is faith!"

For hundreds of years people believed that the earth remained stationary at the center and the sun circled around the earth. In 1543 Nicolaus Copernicus made the startling discovery that the sun is the center and the earth and the other planets revolve around the sun. He published his findings in a book just before he died in 1543. This has been called the beginning of modern astronomy. At the time, Bible scholars, including Luther and Calvin, condemned what they called the Copernican theory. With the invention of the telescope and the advance of astronomy a sun-centered universe is *fact*.

The wise men were convinced about the certainty of their quest. They had been told of the birth of a king in Judea. They arrived at the royal palace. Where else would they look for a king? They did not come asking questions about something that might have happened or might

happen. They did not even ask, *Where is the one born to become king of the Jews?* But **Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?** It was a question based on fact: the King has come. Jesus' kingly status was not conferred on him later. He is the Messiah. He is established in the royal dynasty of David. One day, even the title over the cross would read, **The King of the Jews**. In many societies there has been observed a midwinter festival. Many of the trappings of these festivals have been attached to our Christmas festivities. There is the burst of spending and parties and eating and drinking. Yet, at the heart of it all is a quiet event, the fact of Christmas morning – the birth of God on earth. We call Christianity a historic religion. We do not mean that it belongs to the past, but that it is based on documented historical fact.

HOPE (It is possible to see the King)

The wise men were convinced of what had happened and they had been guided in such a way that they would be able to see the King for themselves. If they came from Babylon it was a journey of 800 miles and would have taken about 40 days. **We have come to worship him.** In Herod's palace there was no sign of a new king. All they found was suspicion and fear. Herod had been appointed king by the Romans and was a strong and able ruler in many ways. He built theaters, cities, palaces and fortresses and especially the Jerusalem temple. The temple was 1.5 million square feet and occupied one sixth of the area of the city. But Herod ruled by fear and force and as he got older he became increasingly paranoid at the thought of any rival to his throne. The man who had murdered his wife, her mother and at least three of his sons would not take kindly to hear of one **born king of the Jews**. Pretending to help the wise men in their search he consulted the theological experts.

Matt 2:4 calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

The wise men came asking for a king. Herod knew what this meant – the Messiah! Many kings have sought to eliminate rivals to their thrones. The one whose birth was prophesied to be in Bethlehem was not just another king, but the Messiah. The wise men had set out with the hope that all they had learned, and following the guiding star they would see the king. Having been given the final piece of guidance they left Herod and set off for Bethlehem. Only another six miles and all they hoped for would be fulfilled.

*Matt 2:11*¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening