

Joseph's Nightmare: Recognizing the Voice of God

Matthew 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 [Micah]:

*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.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

¹⁶ *When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.* ¹⁷ *Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:*

¹⁸ *“A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”*

This narrative of the months following Jesus birth seems to suggest that humans were guided by God through miraculous means such as stars and dreams specifically in order to claim the baby Jesus as Messiah¹ and then to rescue him from the grave danger that knowledge of that fact put him in. Why does Matthew share with us this story and can we too hope to be guided by God to worship the true king of the universe as these wise men were? How did Joseph know to grab his wife and son and run in the middle of the night for a foreign land? Is it possible that God still speaks to us today? Can you and I recognize God’s voice?

God speaks to us most clearly through His word in Scripture. But does God speak in other ways too? Can we train ourselves to recognize his voice as Joseph did? The ninth grade girls small group meets at 6:30 AM on Fridays, a positively barbaric hour for teenage girls to do anything. We were talking one morning about Samuel, the boy prophet, who heard God calling him in the night, but didn’t recognize God’s voice until Eli, the prophet told him it was God. Then we talked about the young boy Jesus who **did** know the will of his father and stayed behind to discuss Scripture with the teachers in the temple while his parents thought he was lost. I posited the idea that at some point as we grow in our faith that God begins to speak to us like he did Samuel and the twelve year old Jesus.

¹ Matthew 2:4-6

At some point, our faith is no longer that of our parents but must become our own. The girls asked a good question, “How do we know when God is talking to us?” How do we know we’re not just us talking to ourselves?

In this amazing story from Matthew 2, Matthew offers us clues as to how God speaks to human beings. God’s hand brings not only worship to the child Jesus, the tiny Messiah, but and also clearly guides the steps of those wise enough to listen and righteous enough to obey. In so doing, Jesus’ newborn life is saved from sure destruction by a paranoid, power hungry old king.

There couldn’t be better characters to make for a good tale; the loving family with the little baby; mysterious visitors who come from lands far away in the east bearing expensive gifts and warning the parents of grave danger, the evil old king whose many wives and sons are plotting to succeed him, a murderous plot to hold power over the Jews of Palestine.

But one little boy escapes, the one who will change the course of history forever, the one who will be not just King of the Jews but King of the Universe. He escapes because three wise men are compelled to follow a star by a God who works in mysterious ways. One boy escapes because his righteous and godly father knows how to recognize and obey his maker. Jesus survives because Joseph, his father, knows the difference between a nightmare and a message.

First a bit of background to get the setting:

Herod the Great was a contemporary of Antony and Julius Caesar. Cleopatra the Queen of Egypt was one of his numerous enemies. He began his career as Governor of Palestine and was later proclaimed King of the Jews. He

was himself half Jewish. By the time of Jesus' birth Herod was in his seventies, in very ill health and nearing the end of his tumultuous life. Herod was jealous for power and painfully paranoid.²

Bethlehem, where baby Jesus and his mother and father now lived, amongst their family clan, the descendents of David, was only five miles south of Herod's palace in Jerusalem and only three miles north of the Herodian, the fabulous mountain top fortified palace that Herod built to escape to in case someone attacked him in Jerusalem. Jesus and his family lived almost literally in the shadow of Herod.³

When our kids were very small, we used to stop at the Darien Sport Shop to look at the crèche. One night when my daughter Laura was about two and a half and Elliot about four, we were all standing and admiring the nativity scene under the big pine tree when we noticed there was no baby Jesus in the manger. Assuming that vandals had stolen him, we bemoaned the fact that someone would be nasty enough to steal the baby Jesus figurine. "Who would do such a thing?" we asked each other in disgust. Little Laura piped up and said, "I bet it was King Herod!"

Just to show you what kind of a guy Herod was, near the very end of his life, quite possibly soon after the visit of the Magi, he called the all of the noblemen of the Jews to Jerusalem to meet him at the Hippodrome in Jerusalem. When they arrived, he locked them in and gave orders that they be executed at the time of his death so that there would be mourning on the day of his death, rather than celebrations. Thankfully, Herod was so little respected, that when he died, the Jewish noblemen were released. But, it is this man in this state of mind that the Magi from the East came to looking to find the NEW King of the Jews. Can you imagine Herod's rage? How ironic that the half Jewish King of the Jews seeks to kill the Messiah to protect his position while Babylonian astronomers travel far to bow down and worship the baby Christ.⁴

² *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*

³ Ray Vander Laan w/ Stephen and Amanda Sorenson. *Faith Lessons on the Life and Ministry of the Messiah*, Participants Guide. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999. Chapter 1.

⁴ *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

And these mysterious Magi? Who were they? Why would they come so far following a star? Why would they bring such expensive gifts?

God, who repeatedly taught his people to never, ever, EVER, follow astrology or worship stars and planets used a star to guide pagan priestly astrologers to his Son. Magi is Greek for magician and here refers to Persian priests who can interpret special signs.⁵ Sometimes we call them “Wise Men.” Though the Old Testament and the New condemns astrology and any form of magic God placed a star in the sky, perhaps a convergence of planets, a one time astrological event, to bring the Magi to Bethlehem. These pagan priests had no doubt heard from the Jews living in exile in Babylon or Persia of the coming of a great long awaited king, the Messiah and they came to see for themselves.

Because of their willingness to leave everything and earnestly to seek for truth, God leads them to find King Jesus. Psalms 19:1 tell us

¹ *The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.*

God spoke to them and compelled them to come to Jesus in the way that they understood best. These men, wise as they may have been, did NOT know the voice of God. They did not recognize who he was yet they were brought by God.

The magi were willing to follow in obedience even what they only sensed as divine in nature. God speaks to all of us in the ways we can understand but it was their **obedience** to leave their homeland to travel to worship a king they did not yet know that made the difference between the life and death of Jesus. And in so doing God provides an initial form of warning to Joseph that danger might lurk.

God speaks to each of us in any way he sees fit and in the way that fits us best if we are willing to follow him.

⁵ *Theological Wordbook of the New Testament.*

Notice they didn't have travel insurance!! There is never any insurance policy when we step out in faith to seek the Son of God. Following the voice of God requires great risk. And there is no guarantee. When Peter stepped out of his boat onto the sea in the middle of the night, there was no guarantee that he could walk on water as Jesus could. It was an impulsive act to draw closer to Jesus and God honored it.

The Magi after stepping out in blind faith to follow a voice they DID NOT RECOGNIZE, found the key to the mystery of the universe, not in the heavens, but in Scripture. The miraculous star that reappears to guide them the five last miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is an astounding confirmation to them that this king they seek is divine. They could have found their way to Bethlehem without the star now that they knew where they were going. Yet as they neared their destination, God sent them a star that they, as astronomers would instantly recognize as something supernatural. I'm told that natural stars **don't** move from north to south, the direction from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, nor do they move visibly over the course of a few hours and then stop.

The miracle of this last appearance of the star is confirmation of the rightness that they had perhaps questioned as they had traveled for months. But clearly, it was the prophets writing in the Scripture and not the star that finally lead them to the baby, to Bethlehem. Because they didn't know the Bible, the Scripture had to be explained to them by those who knew it best. And for those of us who do know something of Scripture, it is our job to make it clear to those for whom it is not immediately clear. **It is through Scripture that God usually speaks most clearly to us as it did to those wise men so long ago.** The uncertain stars are replaced by the certainty of the truth of the word of God.⁶

After exhibiting faith that manifests itself in unquestioning obedience, after having scripture explained, after bowing low before the true king, the Magi are warned by a dream that travel through Jerusalem has become dangerous and they take an alternate route home.

⁶ Frederick Dale Brunner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1-12*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004.

This dream thing is a bit scary. Warned by dreams? Why I've had thousands of dreams and I wouldn't want to take any of them too seriously. Yet at this point it seems, the Magi knew to take their dream seriously.

Joseph too has a dream. An angel of the Lord speaks to him. Verse 13: "... *“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”* ¹⁴ *Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt,*

What convinced Joseph to wake up from a dream and pack up his little family in the middle of the night and go off to Egypt?

How could Joseph recognize the voice of the Lord from a common nightmare? It had been a pretty exciting day, perhaps this dream was just stress. How did Joseph recognize the voice of God?

For Joseph, there had been a previous dream, an angel had talked to him once before and had told him not to quietly break off his engagement to the pregnant Mary. Chapter 1 verse 20 says:

^{20b} *an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.”* ²¹ *She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”*

Joseph, was obviously a very godly man and had recognized God's voice in this first dream as well. Then Joseph had the rightness of his belief confirmed by the shepherds and most recently by the visit from the Magi. God could speak to Joseph now because of his past obedience. **For Joseph to hear a word from God was to act on it. Joseph had the experience to know that what God spoke, he would do.**

When Jesus grew up, he said, in John 10:3-5,

³ ...He [God] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him **because they know his voice.** ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Verse 27 **My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.** That's such a wonderful verse, **My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.** Joseph too recognized the voice of God.

How can we recognize God's voice? We can recognize it if we purposely listen to it over and over. Emperor Penguins breed in colonies of up to 40,000 mating pairs. They all look the same to me. Evidentially, they look similar to one another too which is why they identify one another by their voice. They can find their own mate or their own chick by sound. When you see them on TV in those big groups going peep, peep, peep, they are imprinting the sound of their voice on their children or their mates.⁷

There is only one way for us to learn the sound of God's voice, by listening to it. We must learn to recognize God's voice over our own self talk if we expect to hear it ring clear and true. We can hear our shepherd's voice by reading his word, studying it, spending lots of time quietly with Jesus in prayer, and being willing to take some risks. (Maybe that's why when angels speak to people from God they so often said, "Do not be afraid!")

For Joseph, the dream was confirmed in the circumstances. There were clues that his dream made sense, living so close to Herod and knowing of his megalomania the dream made sense. God makes sense. The fact that the Magi had come to visit and had tipped Herod off to the possible new king, made the dream make sense too.

You may have heard the joke that if it were three wise **women** who visited the Holy Family instead of three wise **men**, they would have brought something more practical, like casseroles, baby clothes, and toys. Well, if I had to leave suddenly, in the middle of the night, on an unplanned international trip with a baby...in the absence of an American Express card, which is lighter and fits more easily in a purse, I'd prefer a treasure chest full of gold coins over a casserole any day. Which may be why God sent **wise men** instead of **wise women** to visit baby Jesus!!

When God speaks to us we must be willing to act, even in the middle of the night. When God speaks to us we will recognize his voice if we've been spending time in his word, listening to him speak. When God

⁷ *Nature's Music: The Science of Birdsong*, Peter Marler and Hans Slabbekoorn, 2004, Academic Press, p. 196 accessed through Google Books online

speaks to us it will make sense. When in doubt, God's voice will always be consistent with his word to us in the Bible.

Oh-And how do we know we're not just talking to ourselves when we hear the voice of God? I'm afraid that we, like Joseph and the wise men, have no insurance for our trip and no guarantees, but if we, like righteous Joseph are so steeped in Gods Word that we know what he would say. If we like sheep, have followed him on the path so many times we've learned the way he would have us take. Then we will recognize God's voice over our own.

Good story, happy ending. I like happy endings. Jesus and his parents and the wise men all escaped.

.....

Only it wasn't a happy ending at all for the little town of Bethlehem. Joseph's nightmare came true. Now we know why he was so scared that he climbed from his bed and immediately packed up and left that very night. Soon the streets of Bethlehem were no longer quiet and peaceful like the song we love to sing about it. Herod, angry that he had been tricked by the wise men, had his men swoop down on the town and for revenge kill every boy under the age of two.

Funny, there are no Christmas cards about that. Christmas ends in wailing and lamentation. (Verse 18) Rachel, representing all the Jewish mothers, wept for her children. And they refuse to be comforted because the little ones were no more. No more little boys to play in the streets. No more sweet little smiles. No more hugs.

So great are the number of assassinations that Herod has called for that the killing of few babies and toddlers doesn't even make the nightly news. He had killed his own children, this wasn't much in comparison. Historians don't even bother reporting it, it is of so little consequence compared to the evil that this man perpetrated.

And Jesus was born into this time and place. It reminds me of so many times and places we hear of on the news; bombings, assassinations, revenge killings, mindless meaningless slaughter. Herod surely reminds us of other

rulers we have known lately. Matthew, who recorded this story doesn't even tell us what to think about it. He only tells us to weep.

It seems Jesus was born into a world much like ours. We live in a world where evil is very powerful. God's voice always makes sense, but the evil in the world around us rarely does.

Joseph's nightmare came true for the parents of Bethlehem. We'll never know if they too heard an angel speak in a dream. The only thing that is clear, is the importance of those who did listen, who did recognize God's message and who did go.

Most of this story seems to be cloaked in darkness; dreams and stars leading the way; mysterious men with treasure and evil kings and murder. Today, 2011 years later, God, in his love and mercy, has given us one final key to help us hear and recognize his voice. Perhaps because there is great evil in this world God has given us a final gift that is greater and more miraculous than angels and stars and dreams.

After Jesus grew and died on the cross and was resurrected, he left us his own Spirit, The Holy Spirit to live in our hearts. In John 16:15 He said that the Holy Spirit "will receive from me what he will make known to you" The Holy Spirit will speak God's word to our hearts and make it known to us.

In great stories, the ending when revealed explains how it all works. The revelation of the Holy Spirit is the final clue to recognizing God's voice. Ephesians 1:13 "...when you had **heard** the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and **had believed in him**, [you] were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;"

The Holy Spirit is the seal of ownership that shows we are his and he is ours. This Holy Spirit is our final key to recognizing God's voice. The Holy Spirit is Christ not just with us, as at Christmas, but Christ IN us. The Holy Spirit is the comforter in our times of enormous sorrow and even death, he is the counselor in our times of confusion, he is the one who brings the truth to our minds. He is the very voice of God in our hearts leading and

guiding the steps of wise men and women who are willing to risk stepping out to follow Him, sometimes even in the face of evil.