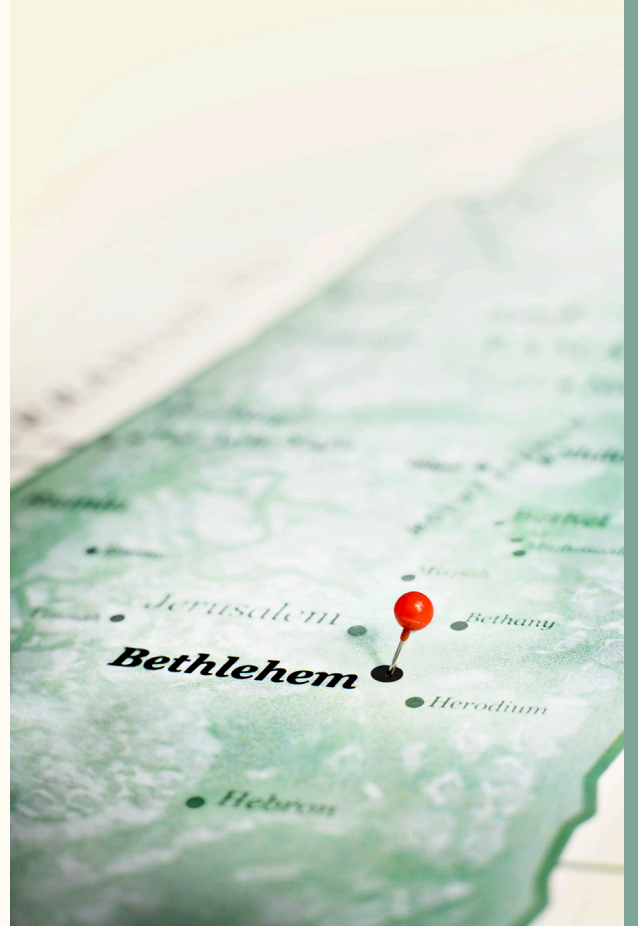


A silhouette illustration of three people riding camels across a desert landscape, following a large, multi-pointed star. The scene is set against a light green background with scattered small dots.

From
Another World
to **Ours**

Sermon 1

Who Invited Those Guys?



FROM ANOTHER WORLD TO OURS

Advent Sermon #1


WHO INVITED THOSE GUYS?

By Dr. David R. Mains




Key Sentence: Something special must be going on; just take note of the impressive foreigners who have come to our country.

Text: Matthew 2:1, 2 Peter 3:9


(Note:  icon means "Next Slide," indicating when to advance to the next slide.)

I. UNFORGETTABLE VISITORS

As most of you know, this week begins a new "church year". For those who aren't familiar with this, let me explain that many churches—Catholic, Orthodox and a large number of Protestant congregations—follow a church calendar. It's somewhat akin to the way Jewish people in Bible times had their yearly cycle of feasts and festivals such as Passover or the annual Day of Atonement.

 Well the church calendar begins with the season of Advent. That word means *coming* and suggests the coming to earth of Jesus, the Son of God. Church liturgy speaks of his birth in Bethlehem as his First Advent (or *coming*), and of his return in glory as his Second Advent.



There are always four weekends of Advent, this being the first.  This Advent sermon series is titled "From Another World to Ours." That title should make sense, but be aware

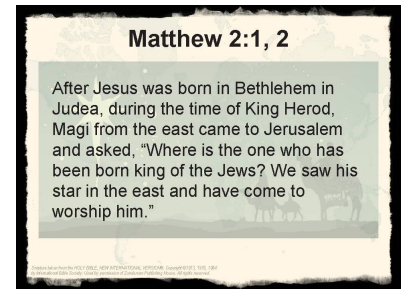


that I'll give additional meaning to those words as we go along.

▶ For me, a peculiar part of the Christmas story, about Jesus coming from another world to ours, is the appearance of the mysterious magi. Magi is spelled M-A-G-I, and it's a word few of us use in everyday conversation.



▶ Matthew 2 verse 1 reads, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of 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.'"



▶ Now these men who made this journey were not Christians. That term wouldn't come into existence until decades later. The magi weren't Jewish, either. The consensus of scholars is that they came from the country we today know as Iran.



While today many Americans might picture Arab Muslim terrorists when they think of Iran, it would have been next to impossible for them to have been Muslims, or followers of Mohammed, because this event took place almost 600 years before the prophet of Islam was born.

Now it's true that present-day Iranians are for the most part Muslims, and, yes, their prophet is Mohammed. But being an Iranian doesn't mean you are therefore a terrorist any more than being an American automatically makes you a gangster or drug dealer.

Most of all, however, Iranians are not Arabs. Let me explain. An Arab is a person who uses the Arabic language in everyday conversation and identifies with the Arab culture. ||► There are 18 countries that fit that category, shown on this map. From west to east, they include:



- * Mauritania
- * Morocco
- * Algeria
- * Tunisia
- * Oman
- * Libya
- * Egypt
- * Sudan
- * Lebanon
- * Iraq
- * Syria
- * Jordan
- * Bahrain
- * Yemen
- * Qatar
- * Kuwait
- * Saudi Arabia
- * United Arab Emirates

Granted, there are some non-Arab people who live in these 18 countries. An example all of us have heard of would be the Kurds in Northern Iraq. There are also Arab people living in non-Arab countries. For example, many Arabs live in present day Israel.

Generally speaking, however, these 18 countries are thought of as both Arab and Muslim, and I should point out that Iran is not one of the 18. That's because, although most Iranians are Muslim, so their religion is the same, their language and culture are not. Iranians don't speak Arabic. Their language is Persian. And that's also the culture with which they identify (Persian), which amounts to quite a significant difference.

||► Because of the war in Iraq, you know where that country is. Iran and Iraq border each other, but their people don't speak the same language, nor do they share the same culture.



It's a little like us trying to explain to someone from far away that the U.S. and Mexico are two distinctly different countries. Yes, some

people in the States speak Spanish like folks throughout Mexico do, but the predominant language here is English. And yes, they're both predominantly Christian. Even so, there are some major differences in the way we worship. There are also numerous cultural differences between the two nations. Make sense?

▶ All this will have a bearing on where we are going in this series, but for now let's just be content to say that the magi came from faraway Persia in the east, or from what we today call Iran. So they were on a journey of somewhere around a thousand miles, or what would be like us traveling without a car from Chicago to Denver. That would take a good while, right?



▶ They were following a mysterious star. And when they finally arrived in little Bethlehem, which even today is not really a very big place, I'm sure they didn't look much like natives. They didn't talk like natives either. Nor did they act like Bethlehem was where they were from. These men were foreigners in every sense of the word. I'm sure they stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. And if they spoke any Hebrew, I would be willing to bet they did so with a Persian accent.



On top of that, these magi were moneyed people. Even back then it didn't take much savvy to know who's got a lot of it and who doesn't.

So when these well-to-do and obviously cultured outsiders hit little backwoods Bethlehem, they must have been "a sight to see." My guess is that more than one local thought to himself, "Something special must be going on; just take note of the impressive foreigners who have come to our country."

And you know what? Something special was going on. The great God who spoke the universe into existence, the same Lord of All who was responsible for fashioning this beautiful world, the marvelous Creator who brought to life all the plants and fish and birds and animals and, yes, people as well, had now himself taken on flesh. He had come to Earth as one of us to interact directly with those he made who had gotten things royally messed up. The Father of All had returned to the house of Abraham, to the offspring of the patriarch he loved so dearly, to the ancient land promised Abraham's people. Their long-anticipated Messiah had now arrived on the world's scene.

▶ That Hebrew word "Messiah" in Greek is *Christos* or *Christ*. It's the exact same meaning as Messiah. It's just said in a different language. So non-Jews like us call baby Jesus not the Messiah-Child, but the *Christ-Child*.



Question: Who are we non-Hebrews represented by in this supernatural scenario? Who are the stand-ins for the Gentiles in this otherwise almost totally Jewish event of the actual incarnation taking place, when this great God himself became one of us? Answer: It was these wealthy and wise and world-traveling Persians or Iranians.

These foreigners not only had the smarts to discover the star and follow it, and to outsmart wicked King Herod and return home by a different route, they also showed amazing insight in the gifts they brought this newborn king from another world.

▶ What could be more appropriate to present to a king than gold? That's a no-brainer.

Frankincense was another good choice. Frankincense is a resin that was used to make anointing oil, such as the oil



poured on the head of kings ... priests ... and prophets. Of course Jesus filled all of these roles. He was prophet, priest and king.

Frankincense was also burned as an incense in the temple's inner sanctum—the Holy of Holies where the Jewish High Priest celebrated the yearly Day of Atonement.

Myrrh is usually thought of as a perfume. It's what Mary, the sister of Lazarus, anointed Jesus with in John 11.

The gum from myrrh was mixed with wine and offered to Jesus as a pain killer when he was on the cross. We read about that in Mark 15:23. Quote: *"They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it."*

Then after his death Jesus was embalmed with cloths saturated in myrrh. Just to refresh your memory, here's John 9:39 and 40: *"Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them" (that's Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea) wrapped it with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs."*

As someone who quite often struggles to come up with an appropriate gift for another person, I would say the magi did very well. No wonder we call them "wise men."

But again, whatever country they were from, even as the case appears that present-day Iran was their geographic place of origin, I applaud them, and by doing so say, "We Gentiles feel you represented us more than adequately."

II. BRIDGING THE GAP

As I said earlier, Advent means *coming* and refers to both the first coming of our Lord as a babe in Bethlehem, and his second coming as a conquering king. You can feel the contrast in these words from the pen of John in Revelation 19:

▶ *I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. ... ▶ The armies of heaven were following him, riding white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ... ▶ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:*

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS

At this future point, God's present interactions with human beings will have come to an end, and Judgment Day is what's ahead. Prior to this Second Advent, however, I believe God will do everything possible to draw men and women to himself.

People scoff about Jesus returning again, comments Peter in his second New Testament epistle. Here's chapter 3, verse 4:

▶ *"They will say, 'Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.'*

▶ *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness," the Apostle explains in verse 9. "He*

Revelation 19:11, 12a

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and

Revelation 19:14, 15a

The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike

Revelation 19:15b-16

He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS
AND LORD OF LORDS.

2 Peter 3:4

They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

So the reason for the delay of Jesus' next appearance, his Second Advent, according to Peter, is so that many can still become a part of Christ's kingdom. And indeed God is doing amazing works today in places that before we thought of as being all but closed to the moving of His Spirit. China has known huge numbers coming to the Lord. The same is currently true in India, and many parts of Africa, plus Central and South America.

Paul brings this home quite clearly in Romans chapter 10:

▶ *For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

▶ *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? ▶ As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"*

▶ I also believe God has been busy in North America in a manner that not all that many of us have been aware of. Did you know that of the 300-million-plus who now make up the U.S. population, 32 million, or better than one in ten, is foreign-born? That's right. Their native country is somewhere other than here.

Romans 10:12-13
For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Romans 10:14-15
How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

Romans 10:14-15
As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"



Maybe you've noticed these people and maybe you haven't. But if you just make it a point to consciously start looking, I'm sure you'll discover many of them. They study in our schools, and they make up a large part of our workforce. Some will stay here indefinitely, while a great percentage will eventually return to their countries of origin.

Granted, when they talk they may not sound native-born, but let's face it, they're learning our language and customs, when we would have a pretty hard time trying to learn theirs.

▶ Get to know some of these individuals and before long you will probably encounter what Dr. Larry Merino of *Harvest Mission International* good-naturedly calls the first of **four cultural jolts**—namely “Tensions about Time.”



A church in the Midwest decided to reach out to a group of immigrants from India who were new to their town. They invited the Indians to a dinner in which both groups, the Americans and the new immigrants, could share a meal and get to know each other. A date was decided on and the time was set for 6:30 to 8:00 in the evening. The Americans arrived promptly at the church at 6:30 and waited for awhile, but were disappointed that none of the Indians showed up. So by 7:00, they decided to go ahead and eat. By 8:00 almost everyone had gone home. It was around that time the group from India began to filter in. Needless to say, they didn't get to meet each other that night in a very significant way.

What happened?

Well, the Americans, being raised in a culture that is very conscious of time, wanted to be good hosts. So they came, started, ended and left in their usual

way—promptly and on time. To do otherwise would have demonstrated to their guests that they weren't respectful of their time.

The Indians, on the other hand, were raised in a culture where it would have been bad manners to *show up on time*. In fact, for the Indians, building a friendship means coming late and staying late. To do otherwise would have communicated that they really didn't want to be friendly. Both groups experienced culture shock and were jolted by their different ways of looking at time.

This true story might make you feel as though there is no way you can ever reach out to people from another culture, especially when we have contrasting ideas about what is proper etiquette in social situations. But think of it this way: Haven't you already been involved in cross-cultural situations all your life?

▶ Can I see the hands of those who have ever had a conflict with people they care about? Of course. This is common to our human experience. The misunderstandings most families deal with are usually over different ways of thinking about life. Add to this the fact that everyone sees time in a different way, even families, and you have the perfect recipe for frustration.



Would you believe that the same principles that missionaries use when dealing with other cultures can also help you to get past some of the frustrations you feel when misunderstandings happen in your family?

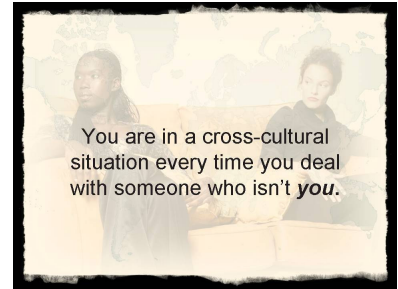
It's true. For example, has anyone here ever said "I don't understand how my wife can always wait until the last minute." or, "How can my husband be so strict about the schedule?" Have some of you who are grandparents marveled at how late your grandchildren stayed up at night? Or how about you younger people?

Aren't you wondering how older folks can go to bed so early? And get up so early?

That's because, in a very real sense, every member of the family comes from a different culture than all the other family members. Husbands and wives, parents and children—all of us have a unique way of looking at time. Put another way, each member of the family has different realities that results in viewing the world differently from each other. So you see, you may not think you are ready to reach out across cultures, but in fact, God has been equipping you for some time ... right in your own family of origin.

▶ *The truth is: You are actually in a cross-cultural situation every time you deal with someone who isn't you.*

On Advent Weeks Two, Three and Four, we will look at Dr. Merino's other three cultural jolts. Some of you will identify with them, I'm sure.



III. SOMETHING SPECIAL IS GOING ON

Now I believe these 32 million foreign-born people will make America stronger and better, just like earlier generations of our foreign-born did. So I see them as not only hard workers, but future leaders both here and abroad. Knowing how difficult it would be for me to travel to another nation and adapt to a different language and culture, I stand in awe of their abilities. And I say, "Something special must be going on; just take note of the impressive foreigners who have come to our country."

It's not necessary to give myself all that much time to think about what's happening before I come to the conclusion that God obviously has a hand in what's taking place. I believe it's another part of His strategy to draw more and more people to himself. Along with the movements of His spirit in countries

thought of as closed to the good news about Jesus, I hold a conviction that the Lord has brought millions to our shores to become acquainted with him through his church and his people.

If for some reason you had to relocate to Iran, or to any of the 18 countries mentioned earlier as examples of Arab nations, it would be an overwhelming experience for you. If anyone reached out a hand to help, it would be deeply appreciated. That's what I believe these newcomers to our land are open to—someone who just shows a loving concern.

▶ I have an assignment for you this week. It's not a hard one. Who needs another task when the Christmas season has just begun, right? Well this is quite simple. What I want you to do between now and next week is see if you can find three of these foreign-born. Just three. For some of you this will be extremely easy. You work with them. Or they live on your block. Maybe they own your favorite restaurant. You younger people may already know three by name because you attend class together.



If you already know their names, that's great. If you don't, maybe you can introduce yourself. Where these three people are from is going to be important to them. I sometimes ask, "If I bring a map, can you show me where that is?" It's just a way of learning more about the world they have lived in and know so very well. My guess is that you will find these people ready to talk. Quite quickly you will also discover that we don't know nearly as much about their world as they do about ours. And you may find them challenging preconceived notions you have, such as Iranians being Arabs.

You may have noticed in the church lobby I've put up a world map. It's there because next week I want you to stick a red pin in the various countries for each of the three people you identify this week. Too often the 32 million foreign-born

remain invisible to us. That needs to change. Why? If for no other reason than because every person is important to God.

We also have smaller maps that each of you can take home. On your own map, write down the name of each person you meet, in the country they are from. You can pick up your map at _____. For example [hold up your own map], I've written down the name _____ in the country _____. I met [him/her] at _____. Then I also put a red pin in the map in the lobby in that country.

▶ “From Another World to Ours”—that’s the title of this December series. It’s obviously about Jesus, but now you know it’s also about the millions who have come to America from various places around the world. Hopefully, while here, they can come in contact with Jesus through us, maybe even during a future Advent season.



The preaching I will do leading up to Christmas Eve/Day won’t require a whole lot from you by way of response. Hopefully, however, during these weeks of Advent you will come to realize that something quite special is going on that you don’t want to miss out on. My prayer is that God will surprise you as you get to know some of these remarkable visitors who have come from another world to ours, just as the people in Bethlehem were surprised by the magi from Iran whom God brought to their town-way back when His Son was born there so many years ago.

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