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# Follow that Star!

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## **FOLLOW THAT STAR!**

Have you ever noticed how much black ink you need to print a picture of light? And when you drive through that tunnel between here and Denver -- the one with the curves so you can't see the end of the tunnel until the road straightens out....did you ever stop to think that that there'd be no light at the end of the tunnel...if there were no tunnel?

In 1957, Theodore Geisel, a.k.a. Dr. Seuss, wrote a book called *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Many of you know the story, which happens in the town of Whoville. The Grinch hates Christmas--so he tries to figure out a way to stop Christmas from coming to Whoville.

He decides if he steals all the presents, decorations, and special Christmas food then he can stop Christmas from coming. The Grinch spends the whole night before Christmas sneaking around and stealing everything Christmassy from all the houses in Whoville. When Christmas morning comes the Grinch is shocked. His plan didn't work--Christmas still came to Whoville. "It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes, or bags." The people are still happy and they gather hand-in-hand to sing Christmas songs. And the Grinch learns that "maybe, just maybe, Christmas doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas means a little bit more."

We can see a Grinch in today's gospel reading. Let's look at some of these characters a little more closely.

### **Magi**

As we've mentioned before, we don't know how many magi there actually were. We assume three because there were three gifts. We do know they were: men of science--astronomers, highly educated, wealthy, upper class citizens, and highly respected in their Gentile culture. The magi were not faithful to the Jewish religion. True, they were pagans but they were seekers of the truth, visionaries, and spiritual. We are accustomed to the translation of "Magi" as "wise men." But some scholars think that because these

guys are such good models of faith, we've been afraid to see them for what they really were.

Check this out: By Jesus' time the term magi referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, and sorcerers – NOT the wise and respected "Kings" from afar, but horoscope watchers – a practice condemned by Jewish standards. One might even go so far as to compare these guys to modern-day psychics and palm readers and other folks that claim to foretell the future by the stars or by tea leaves and Tarot cards. I've read that the Zoroastrian religion they practiced was the beginning of alchemy – turning ordinary elements into Gold! In Acts 13, Barnabas and Saul – who becomes Paul – come across Elymas, a Jewish magus (the singular form of magi).

Listen to what Paul says to him in verse 10: "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

Magi were not models of religious piety. They should not be in this story. They're pagans and they don't know how to worship properly. The gifts they brought are probably some of the elements they used in their magic. But here they are, not as bad examples of how not to behave or believe, but models of faith, giving, and humility.

### **Herod**

Herod the Great reigned from 37-4 B.C. He was a Gentile, appointed by the Roman Senate. He had issues! He murdered his wife, his three sons, brother-in-law, uncle, and his mother-in-law, to name a few.

Herod's reign was noted for the many theaters, amphitheaters, monuments, pagan altars, and fortresses that he built. His greatest work was the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, (a huge political gesture), started in 20 B.C. and completed in 64 A.D., it was destroyed by the Romans 6 years later. He was power hungry, self-absorbed, and ruthless.

### **Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law**

The chief priests and teachers of the Law were trained and educated in the details of scripture, but spiritually ignorant. Caught up in the letter of the law rather than the spirit, they had the right answers, but didn't possess the right heart.

### **The Conflict**

In this story we see several conflicts.

Between Herod and the Magi: Herod tried to cover up the conflict, but clearly he was at odds with them. Herod's true colors came out when the magi went home by another way. Which, I might add is an interesting bit of word Biblical play because in the ancient Greek, prepositions, i.e. by, for, with, in, out, from, and so forth -- are very frustrating because you kind of have to guess the best preposition for the context. 'By another way' translates from, *Dia allos hodos*. *Dia* being the preposition, the Magi could just as easily have gone home 'WITH another way'.

There was conflict between Herod and Jesus: Jesus was a threat to Herod. Jesus was the Messiah, the true King of the Jews. Herod was an imposter and not entitled to the throne either by heritage or divine choice.

The king of the Jews was to be God's representative, and Herod is the antithesis of God - - devaluing life, pagan, self-centered, and so on. Herod is a Grinch-like character, who seems to be in conflict with everyone around him.

The chief priests and teachers of the Law can represent the Grinch's dog, Max.

There is another Grinch-like character in this story: sin. Keep this in the back of your mind. So, which one is the real Grinch?

Let's go back to the story and join the journey of these characters. And, to help us identify the real Grinch we need to look at their motivations. All of these characters were on a journey. They were all seeking for meaning in life, something outside of themselves. Like us. This was their motivation. All of the characters were searching for meaning.

This is also true of people today. We all have a desire to find meaning in life -- a natural (God-given) desire to find something of substance outside of ourselves. Sometimes we get confused between the God-given desire for meaning and the self-centered desire.

How did this search for meaning manifest itself in our characters?

**Herod** believed you should put yourself first. Look out for “numero uno.” “Every man for himself.” Everything Herod did was motivated by self-preservation. We see it all the time in people today, don’t we? Selfishness motivates people to do all kinds of things. The Grinch’s selfishness made him want to steal Christmas.

**Chief priests** and teachers of the Law believed Knowledge of the Law was paramount. Everything centered on knowledge and learning. They debated the fine points of the Law. They formed study groups. They made and broke relationships based on their interpretation of the Law. They stressed the importance of the Law, but ignored the Law-giver. People do that today too: They have the erroneous belief they can figure it out and come up with all the answers. You hear it on talk radio and television shows. The hosts and the callers have all the answers to all the world’s problems.

**The Grinch** was trying to figure it all out, too. And how many times has this happened to you? He thought he had it figured out, but he didn’t.

**The magi** were searching for meaning in life outside of themselves. They were seeking ‘the One’ who made life meaningful. Money was not an issue. Power was not an issue. Position and titles weren’t issues to them. They were looking for something that would help them make sense out of life. Maybe you fall into this category. Maybe you’ve tried the self-centered approach and it has left you empty or lonely. Maybe you’ve tried to figure it all out and it left you cold, with more questions than answers.

Look at the results of the actions of these three characters.

Herod, the self-absorbed and power-hungry, was led to frustration, failure, and loneliness.

The chief priests and teachers of the Law, the “I’ve-got-all-the-answers” guys found cold hard facts but missed the meaning, they never ‘got it.’

But the magi -- sincere seekers of truth, meaning, and substance -- found what they were looking for.

Notice the actions of the magi. They were trained observers and something got their attention: Something caused them to ask questions and go searching: the star.

What is your star? What is it that has you searching for meaning? Has something grabbed your attention and made you start wondering what’s going on? Has God used a situation in life, a tragedy, a sickness, a financial crisis? Maybe a friend, or a stranger, a book, or a line from a movie?

The magi started on a journey for truth, meaning, and substance in life. God led them on their journey. God has led you on your journey this morning, to this place, on purpose. None of us is here by accident.

The magi searched in the wrong place--Jerusalem. It was logical to go to Jerusalem because Jerusalem was the capitol city. Naturally you’d go there to look for a king. But, it was not logical if you knew the whole story. The Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. The logical thing would have been to go to Bethlehem. We often think we know more than we know. As a result we search where we think we ought to look, but it’s the wrong place.

If we knew the whole story, we’d know to go to Jesus to start with.

God put them back on course. God looks at the sincerity of our hearts and guides us in our search for truth, meaning, and substance in life.

So we have three choices for our Grinch character. Herod, who was about self-absorption? The chief priests with all the “answers” trying to figure it all out on their own? Or the magi who unexpectedly demonstrated unshakeable faith in Christ?

Who is the real Grinch in the story? Not Herod; he couldn't steal Christmas. Not the chief priests and teachers of the Law; they couldn't steal Christmas. Not even sin itself could steal Christmas... (in fact, Christmas happened because of sin).

The real Grinch is.... It's us, it's you & me. We steal Christmas from ourselves. We give up our relationship with God, our character and integrity, we give up our peace.

But, unlike Dr. Seuss' Grinch—who brought all the stuff back -- we can't give it back to ourselves. We need a Savior. We need Jesus!

### **Conclusion**

The magi point us to the right choice: break with the self-absorbed quest and go beyond mere knowledge. They teach us to search for the One who can give life meaning and substance.

You can live the self-absorbed life motivated by selfish ambition and self-preservation.

You can keep trying to figure it all out, gathering information, searching for answers as if you have the mental capability to know it all.

Or, like the Who's down in Whoville, if we come out of our dark little houses, hold hands & sing sing, and worship together in community -- guess what? The light is there - right there - in the midst of us!

So what are you going to do, Mr. Grinch?