

## Magi and Mudslides

Two young men were walking home from work together. They decided to take a shortcut through an unfamiliar field, and as they're walking and talking, they realize that they're coming towards an old well. As they start to pass by, one takes a glance down and says to the other "hey, this looks really deep, I can't even see the bottom of it." So the other one picks up a small stone and tosses it in. They watch it drop out of sight, and they stand there listening for it to hit the bottom, and make a splash, but it never makes a sound. "Well, maybe that just wasn't big enough. We'll get a bigger one and it oughtta make a splash." So they drop a football-sized rock down the well and wait. And wait. No splash. So the two guys are kind of puzzled, but now they're getting determined. They start searching around them and one of them sees a railroad tie in the weeds. He says to himself "Now *this* thing his massive. It's got to make a noise." So he calls to his buddy and the two of them heave it up and carry it back a little ways to the well. They push it up and it clatters over the edge, but then it drops and drops until it's out of sight. The two men stand there just waiting and listening for about a minute and still they hear absolutely no sign that this huge heavy railroad tie has ever hit the bottom.

The two of them just stand there in silence until they begin to hear a noise behind them. So they turn around and they see a goat running in their direction. It starts to get closer and closer and they realize it's coming directly towards them and it's just barreling along at breakneck speed. They move a little bit to one side and the goat doesn't change direction. It's now headed directly towards the well. So they two men just stand there in shock as the goat runs just as fast as its legs will carry it towards the well, and as reaches it, the goat leaps in the

air and plunges straight down into the depths of the well. The two guys run back over and stare into the blackness but the goat is gone and they never hear it make a splash at the bottom either. So the two guys stare at each other and they stare back into the well and they're just stunned speechless. After a few minutes they hear someone behind them say "'Scuse me fellas." They kind of jump and they turn around and there's a farmer standing there. The two guys stammer a hello and the farmer says "I'm looking for my goat. You fella's haven't seen a goat wandering around here, have ya'?" The two men are still a little stunned, but one manages to get words out of his mouth and he says "Well, yes sir, we did see your goat. The thing just came runnin' right at us and then he jumped into the air and dove straight down this well here." The farmer walks over to the well and he looks down. Then he looks at the ground around the well and then back at the two men, and finally he says "No, boys, that couldn't have been my goat. My goat was chained up to a railroad tie."

I've heard that joke told to make fun of people from the big city, or tourists, or various other things, but I thought of it when I read this scripture because the characters were looking for things. They were looking for a shortcut, and they were looking for a bottom to the well, and for bigger and bigger things to throw into it, and then the farmer comes along looking for his goat. All of the characters in this chapter of Matthew's Gospel are looking for something too. Herod is looking for a threat to his throne, and the Magi are looking for a king to worship.

So we've got all of these characters looking for something, but who the heck are they? We've got Herod, who we know a lot about. He was the king the Romans left in charge of Judea, and he was a practicing Jew himself, though not a very good one. Herod killed off members of his own family, he tries to send the Magi looking for Jesus so he can kill him, then

that doesn't work out and he tries to kill Jesus again by killing all the boys his age in the vicinity of Bethlehem. He was a gnarly guy.

Then there's the Magi. Who the heck are they? Well, that's not so easy. The King James says these are "wise men," and the familiar Christmas hymn calls them "kings." But the Bible is pretty vague about them. All it says they came from the direction of the rising sun, and theories range on that being anywhere from right next door in present day Yemen to as far east as China. Some more modern church traditions have them being from three different places and giving them the names of Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar. But these are all just theories. Even the number of the Magi is just a theory. The Bible simply says that there was a group of Magi and doesn't give a number at all. The number three comes from the three different types of gifts they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

What we *do* know about them is that they came looking for Jesus, and unlike Herod, these were some pretty faithful guys. They studied the skies, and they saw what we now call the "Star of Bethlehem" in the sky. And they got up and they followed it. The Bible doesn't tell us how they knew the significance of this star. They were probably gentile astrologers since they were looking at the sky, and probably not scriptural scholars, since they had to ask Herod and *his* wise men for more precise directions. Maybe they learned *why* they should follow the star in a dream from God like they'd be warned about Herod later. Or maybe they were just following the traditions of the day and assuming that a unique astrological or astronomical event signified the birth of an important person like a ruler. But for whatever reason, they acted on it; they saw the star, they got up, and they headed toward Jerusalem and they even told Herod specifically that they came on this journey to worship the newborn king.

I used to live and work in Ecuador, and one summer about 10 years ago I was hosting short-term teams, there was a week when I went on a journey. I didn't think of it that way when it started out, though. I was hosting a group of mostly high school students from Utah who spent a week working in the tiny village of Shandia, in the jungle region of the country. Depending on the weather, Shandia can be as little as four or five hours away from the capital city of Quito where I lived and mainly worked.

On the Monday morning we were supposed to leave Quito, I woke up early to get my personal things and some of the team equipment packed and taken to the team's hostel to put on the bus. I also had just a couple more things to pick up from the store before we left the city headed for the jungle. I arrived at the hostel to find that our other Youth World staffer, Gina, was running a little late, my partner, Amalia, was running *a lot* late, none of the corner stores in the neighborhood were open yet, and the bus company had sent us a 21-seat bus. We had 22 people. Needless to say, I was not happy. Also needless to say, we got out of town later than I had expected.

We finally got moving that morning and the bus driver turned around the Gina and he said "So where are we going?" And Gina says "We're going to Shandia." And he says "So I go south through town from here?" And Gina says "*No*, you go north *out* of town from here." I was really at that point that most of the team members didn't speak Spanish and missed that whole conversation.

So finally we're cruising along and I'm thinking we'll be there in time for dinner and maybe even a short worship service with the community that night, and I'm napping and listening to my iPod as we roll down the mountains and then about an hour out of Quito, the

bus slows down and then stops. I've done that trip dozens of times I know where every gas station, bathroom stop, and government checkpoint is. The second the driver hit the brakes, I knew without looking up that something was wrong. I took a deep breath, opened my eyes, and looked out the window.

It was just beginning to rain and I could see a few cars stopped ahead of us through the foggy window. There was something going on just around the bend ahead of us in the road, but I wasn't sure what. I got up and the bus driver told me there was something in the road. I didn't quite recognize the phrase he used to describe it, but I had my suspicions. He held up his arms to demonstrate and I got the message. It was a mudslide, and it had covered the road about an hour earlier. I told the team to stay put and asked the driver to open the door. I hopped out into the rain and jogged up the road. I was expecting the road to have a few inches of mud across it, making it too slick to drive on, sort of like when it floods on Riverside and I think "I drive a Jeep... I can make this." I came around the bend and I saw a pile of mud twice as tall as me completely covering four lanes of the road. Other drivers had gotten out of their cars to look, and one of them told me that the mudslide was went for 40 meters down the road. So we're talking 50 feet by 12 feet by 120 feet of mud just in the road, and it continued up the mountain from its source and over a the cliff for who knows how long. For the second time that day we were delayed, and for the second time that day, I was not happy.

Once we finished taking pictures and realized there was not a chance this would be cleared that day, and might not even be cleared by the time we came back, we turned around to take the long way to Shandia. And this is the part of the story where I start going from being the grumpy King Herod to being one of the Magi on the journey. Because now we really were

on a journey, and we'd get lost in the dark a couple times as the night went on. I'd been to Shandia at least five times before that day, so I knew in my heart and my head that it was there. I had an image of Shandia in my head. I can point to it on a map. I have friends who live and work there. And I felt Called to be hosting teams and serving at that ministry site at that time, and so I knew maybe with more certainty than the Magi that I was *going* to get where I was going.

And as we headed away from that mudslide I started to see the hand of God at work. Just driving out of town in that direction and then turning to come back added two hours to our trip, and taking the long way around added at least one more. So all of a sudden we as a staff had time to get to know our whole team better on just their second day on the ground as we're all crammed into a bus we didn't really quite fit into. I got to know Darren, who told me about how he lived out his faith in his everyday life as a commercial airline pilot. And he also is the guy who taught me later that week a skill I still use in children's ministry all the time... how to juggle. And I got to know Jess, a 25-year-old mom of 2 at that point, who talked about her experience when she was in high school attending a school her district set up just for students who got pregnant, and how that experience made her feel so cared for and this difficult time in her life and how it impacted her ministry and helped her find an easier path towards compassion for people whose lives were different than hers. I had all these conversations with people who I suddenly had 8 hours with and I started looking differently at this journey God had sent us on together.

We made it to Shandia. It took us a while. But we made it. And we worked our tails off while we were there, doing construction on the new leadership development center at the church and putting on a vacation bible school in two villages. And we had a blast, and grew as a group and as individual Believers over the next six days. And we came back by another road.

If Gina and Amalia and I had continued to look for things to fall into our North American schedule, we would not have found those things happening. It turned out God did want us in Shandia and He wanted us there in His time. Once we got there we quit looking at our schedules, and we started asking where we needed to be. More was accomplished in and through us than we could have imagined, and I found what God sought to teach me when I stopped and looked for him.

My friend Mason laughs when people tell a testimony and say that they “found God.” He’ll respond “I didn’t know he was missing.” And He’s not. But it’s easy for us to miss Him when we’re looking for something else.

It would have been easy for me to miss the image of God in Darren, or in Jess. And it would have been easy for me to miss the hand of God keeping us safe that day, because while nobody said it out loud, I think we were all imagining what 72,000 cubic feet of mud would have looked like coming down the mountain towards us if we’d left Quito an hour earlier and been in the middle of that stretch of highway. One of the bystanders told me there had been a farm on the road above and the mudslide took out 12 cows. Our van did not weigh as much as 12 cows.

If I took a poll and asked who you’d want to be in the story from the book of Matthew, I don’t think anyone would raise their hand and say “I really identify with Herod.” Because

Herod is this guy who's so caught up in his own plans, he misses what's really important. He's so determined to make a splash, he doesn't see the goat. He's looking for a threat, and totally fails to recognize the savior who is right in front of him. And here we are on at the beginning of the year 2022 looking with hopes and expectations and making New Year's Resolutions, and wishing that the biggest thing on everybody's minds, the still ongoing pandemic will finally decide to be over this year, and that's all fine. As long as we take a step back and say "God, what's your expectation for me?" "What's your New Year's Resolution for me?" "How can I follow You this year?" "How can I follow You today?" "How can I follow you in the midst of... the things that make me miss You?"

That's the difference between Herod and the Magi in this story, because they were both looking for a baby. But the Magi we're also looking for their God, and they followed Him, and they found Him. When we look for God's plans in our lives and follow Him faithfully, He's the one who gets us there. Amen.