

They All Gather Together

Isaiah wrote down the word of the Lord something like 700 or 800 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Scripture passage we heard earlier points to the coming of Jesus. Isaiah writes, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you,” (Isa. 60:1). And he elaborates on the idea of Jesus drawing people to Himself when he says, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together,” (60:3-4a).

This is exactly what we celebrate on the Church calendar today with the holiday of Epiphany. It’s the last of the twelve days of Christmas and Epiphany reminds us of the time when the Magi traveled to Bethlehem to encounter the Christ Child. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, one of the definitions for epiphany is “an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being.” Usually when we use the word, we mean a personal, sudden realization about something we previously didn’t have. If you have your Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to Matthew 2:1-12. I’m reading the New International Version this morning. **Read Matthew 2:1-12.**

Matthew records some amazing details in the first couple verses of our passage. He writes, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in 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 when it rose and have come to worship Him,’” (Matt. 2:1-2). Most Bible scholars believe that the Magi were astrologers and court magicians from Babylon and Persia. They studied the stars; they looked for signs from their gods – these guys were Gentiles and worshiped many gods – and told whatever king they served what the signs and omens meant.

The Magi: Astrologers & Court Magicians

Magi is a Greek word that means something similar to a court magician. It’s also where we get the idea and word for “magic.” Remember the guys in the house of Pharaoh who Moses had to go up against? When God released the plagues on Egypt, Pharaoh’s magicians were able to do some of the same things, albeit was on a much smaller scale? They were very similar to what the Magi in our Bible story were. They studied the stars – the book of Daniel talks about them. Daniel, specifically, was also a Magi – in the sense that he was a wise person who spoke prophetic words from God – who was in the service of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and later the Kings of Persia.

Perhaps some of the Magi who made the trip to Jerusalem a little more than 2,000 years ago may have heard stories recorded by Daniel, talking about a coming Messiah, and that’s what led these particular guys to make the trip. That’s speculation, of course, because we aren’t told by Matthew how the Magi knew, except that they followed the star. We often think, and sometimes erroneously call them the “Three Wise Men,” or the “Three Kings,” they weren’t kings, though they would have been well-known to whatever king they served. And we don’t know exactly how many of them there were. Church tradition places their number anywhere between three and twelve – and that’s just the Magi – and not counting the entourage that most surely would have been accompanying them.

These guys were high-level folks in their day. They were advisors to kings. And the reason they came, is very clear, “to come and worship” Jesus Christ. Now let’s pause there a minute and think this through. These foreign high-level dignitaries come rolling into Jerusalem, and they’re wanting to see the One who’s been born King of the Jews.

Expecting a King in a Palace

So where do they go? To the royal palace, of course! Kings live in palaces. If foreign dignitaries came rolling into Washington DC, today, to the White House, and said to President Biden, “We’re here to see the one who’s been elected President of the United States,” I suspect he’d feel the same way that Herod did. “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him,” (verse 3).

Herod’s not happy! So, “he called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, and asked them where the Messiah was to be born,” (verse 4). The birth of Jesus was a direct threat to Herod’s kingship. I encourage you to read on past what we’ve read this morning in Matthew’s Gospel to see exactly what Herod attempted to do to eliminate the threat Jesus posed to his reign. Herod was brutal.

The priests tell Herod where Jesus was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel,’” (verses 5-6). You have to hand it to Herod. As wicked as he was, he was meticulous. “Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and search carefully for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him,’” (verses 7-8).

Deceptive Herod and Different Belief Systems

See, Herod plans to use the Magi to do his dirty work for him. He finds out when the star appeared, so that he knows roughly how old Jesus is, and then tells them to come back and let him know where Jesus is, so that he can also go worship Him. The Magi are clueless. I think they really believed and took Herod at face-value when he said he’d like to go worship Jesus also. But Herod’s deceptive. If they would have come back and told him, Herod would have went and wiped out Jesus and the whole family.

It’s not unusual in those places over by India and China to have babies born as kings. At one point the Persian Empire stretched from Greece in the west to the Himalayas in the east – into modern-day Pakistan and India. These are places where Buddhism and Hinduism still exist. It’s normal in those societies for very small children to be crowned. I mean, look at the Dalai Lama, for instance. Tibetan Buddhists believe he’s a reincarnation of the previous Dalai Lamas and Buddha. In those types of religions people worship multiple gods and dead ancestors.

To be clear, reincarnation does not align with a Christian worldview, or with Biblical teaching. You can’t believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior if you think you get to hit a giant “reset” button at the end of this life and come back to try living over again. It may work in video games, but not in real life. We have one life. We ought to use it as the opportunity to live for Jesus, because when our time here is finished, we will be face-to-face with the Lord – and we’ll answer for what we did, or didn’t, do. Now people may not like hearing that, but there it is. That’s just how things are, Biblically-speaking.

They Worshipped Him

So, this grand entourage of dignitaries, decked out in their camel caravan left from Herod's palace in Jerusalem, and set off for the little town of Bethlehem to look for Jesus. "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was," (verse 9), Matthew records. They find Jesus as a child – not a baby. As much as we like our Nativity scenes with three kings bearing gifts at Christmastime, it's just not a Biblically accurate picture of how things turned out.

Notice what Matthew says next. "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh," (verses 10-11). The star evidently stopped above the house – it says it's a house, not a stable – where Mary and Jesus were staying. They were thrilled. Their long trip was finally over.

I've read before that Bible scholars think it took a minimum of 40 days for the Magi to travel by camel from their homeland to Jerusalem. Of course, if the star appeared on Christmas night, it would've taken them longer than that – they would have needed to prepare, pack up, and discuss the trip with their king. If you look down at verse 16, you see they gave Herod a date that was roughly two years previous, which is why he killed all the male children in and around Bethlehem aged two and under after he realized the Magi weren't coming back to him. It's a 1,000-mile trek across the desert – camels are able to travel in that part of the world 25 miles a day – and they would have been traveling by night, to follow the star. Since they were important, they would have probably been escorted by armed guards to help fight off bandits and robbers.

Gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh

The Magi presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The hymn we'll sing momentarily, *We Three Kings*, does a pretty good job of summarizing the significance of each gift. The gold befitted a king – and I'm certain there was a large amount of it. If you look at what happens next in Matthew's account, the angel warns Joseph of Herod's murderous plot, and Joseph packs up Mary and Jesus and flees to Egypt.

And then the Gospel record of Jesus' life stops, for the next decade or so, when we hear of Him being lost as a 12-year-old in the Temple at Jerusalem. During at least part of that time, Jesus lived as a refugee in Egypt. To support the family, Joseph would have used the gold provided by the Magi to make sure the Holy Family's basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing were met in Egypt. People don't like thinking about Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as refugees running from tyrannical King Herod, but there's that in the Gospel, too.

The Wise Men gave the gift of frankincense – a perfume used in worship in the Temple at Jerusalem. It was used by the chief priest when he entered the Holy of Holies once a year to make atonement offerings to God. And then there's the myrrh – a spice used in embalming the dead. John's Gospel (19:39-40) records that when Jesus was taken down from the cross, Nicodemus brought about 75 pounds of it to wrap and prepare Jesus' body for burial. Today, the cost of that 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes would amount to roughly \$200,000. I know the Magi gave more than that.

Gifts of Time and Worship

Besides their tangible gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the Magi also gave of their time – it took months if not years to get to Bethlehem for them to see Jesus Christ. At least temporarily they left behind careers, families, and homes to go and see the Messiah who was heralded by the star that rose. Twice in the passage this morning Matthew notes that the Wise Men worshiped Jesus. We worship many things today – cars, bank accounts, houses, Presidents, even church buildings, and humanistic views of who should and should not be part of the Church.

Friends, beware and be aware! What we worship, we mimic! It's part of our human nature. We've been designed by God to worship something. What we choose to worship shapes us into the people we become. The Magi yielded completely to follow where they were being called.

All the things the Wise Men yielded in obedience to travel across Middle Eastern deserts to see the Son of God were most certainly changed upon their return to their native lands. They sat face-to-face with Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world – and worshiped Him. Matthew tells us, "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route," (Matt. 2:12). They saw God-with-us and were told not to return to Jerusalem. What an epiphany! In other words, "Don't go back to the political and religious leadership, just go home."

Worshipping Without Reservation

The Magi had multiple epiphanies over the course of their journey. They were obedient to the calling to follow the star to the place where the Christ Child resided. They obeyed the directions God gave them in the dream. They turned their talent of astrology – their livelihood of studying the heavens – into an avenue to come to Christ, while also reminding the political and religious leadership in Jerusalem that the Messiah had come, whether they were ready for Him, or not.

They gave gifts from the bounty of their wealth – frankincense, gold, and myrrh. They gave the precious gift of their time, and of their genuine worship – even without knowing what it was that Jesus had come to do for them, and for us, and for all people. Can you imagine the sorts of changes we would make in our lives if we had the opportunity to sit face-to-face with Jesus, and worship Him? I mean to whole-heartedly worship Him – where we turn over everything that we are, everything we've got, every hope and dream we have – to Him? Our lives would change! That's what the Magi did.

With the new year, many people make resolutions to do things a little differently. What changes could you make individually, to help build up community within our church family? What could you do differently in your home to really shine the light of Jesus Christ into your family? And in your workplace? It's been roughly 2,020 years since the Magi rolled into Jerusalem and turned society upside down with the news that the Messiah had been born. How might we turn our society upside down if we were to whole-heartedly worship without any reservation – through our words and actions – the God-with-us who lived, died, and rose again for us and for all people?

Prayer: O God of Light and Peace, whose glory, shining in the Child of Bethlehem, still draws the nations to Yourself: Dispel the darkness that shrouds our path, that we may come to kneel before Christ in true worship, offer Him our hearts and souls, and return from His presence to live as He has taught. Amen.