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Matthew 2:1-12

Third Message

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O WORSHIP THE KING

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Our focus during this season of Advent is on celebrating the coming King. But not everyone sees Christmas in this way. If you ask people about their holiday plans, you quickly see their attitude. I've found they tend to respond to Christmas in one of three ways.

Some of my friends are indifferent about it. They simply see the holidays as vacation time. They're glad for the time off, but there is nothing particularly significant about it. They know it is supposed to be about celebrating Jesus, but they simply ignore that aspect of it. It seems they take their cue from the culture around us. Last week I saw a TV holiday special. It had lots of famous singers with special holiday music, but not one song about Jesus. There were plenty of songs praising Rudolph and Frosty, and Jack Frost and St. Nick, but nothing about Jesus. How easy it seems to be to ignore Christ at Christmas time.

I even know a few people who dislike Christmas time. They hate the crowds, the shopping, the bell-ringing, the entertaining and decorating, and they definitely don't like to be reminded about Jesus, born of a virgin, sent to save people from their sins. They are kings of their own kingdom. With no acknowledgment of sin in their life, they see no need for a personal Savior.

But the great majority of people I know love Christmas. They enjoy the time with family and friends and the giving and receiving of gifts. They see it as a sacred and holy time, a time to focus on Jesus, to celebrate him and find ways to express their worship of him.

Our passage from Matthew's gospel reveals that these same three responses are strikingly similar to the way people reacted to Jesus at the very first Christmas. We will reflect on one of the most picturesque and dramatic stories of the Bible. The visit of the Magi fills our imagination and curiosity. A bright shining star, mysterious wise men traveling from afar, a cruel tyrant bent on destroying the newborn, the arrogant indifference of the religious leaders, and then, ultimately, the gifting of exotic treasure. It is a scene full of drama. Throughout it draws us into the story, inviting us to ask two questions: "Who is the true King?" and "How will we respond to him?"

The main players in this drama are the Magi, Herod, and the religious establishment. Each has a different response to the birth of Jesus.

First, the response of the Magi. Matthew 2:1:

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 TNIV)

We know nothing about these Magi except for what we read here in Matthew's gospel. They are mentioned nowhere else in scripture. Their story lasts only twelve verses, but their inclusion in the narrative of Jesus is very important.

Matthew makes it quite clear that Jesus was from that Davidic line. Jesus' royal credentials have been established. The writer structures the first two chapters of his gospel emphasizing how Jesus fulfills what was promised about the coming Messiah. God keeps his promises. The prophecies of Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah all point to Jesus. He is the promised Messiah the Jews have been waiting for.

But what about the non-Jews? Was Jesus king of Gentiles and foreigners? The Magi arrived in Judea at a time when there were two kings. Which one is the true king? Was it Herod, enthroned in his palace in the capital Jerusalem, the seat of power and prestige, or the child Jesus born in tiny Bethlehem?

The only thing we are told about the Magi is that they came "from the east." Clearly they were not Jews, but Gentiles, foreigners likely coming all the way from Persia. The word Magi is an occupational title referring to astronomer-scholars who were restlessly inquisitive about the universe. They paid particular attention to the stars – at that time a highly regarded science. The Magi were regarded as being particularly wise and influential. Curious about the big questions of life, they searched the heavens for clues. When they saw this rising star, they understood it as a sign, a portent of a significant event. The Magi were convinced that a great king had been born.

They may have been familiar with the oracle by Balaam, and interpreted this rising star as the fulfillment of his prophecy.

"I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near.

A star will come out of Jacob;

a scepter will rise out of Israel!" (Num 24:17)

With the prospect of a great king rising in the Middle East, the Magi wanted to make contact. It would have been a long and arduous journey of hundreds of miles. They took several weeks or perhaps even months to reach their destination. These travelers took an enormous risk. Leaving the security of their home and family, they ventured through the wilderness, risking attack from wild beasts and bandits. They endured the discomfort of heat by day and cold by night but they were determined to find this king. The Magi did not know exactly who or what they would find at the end of their journey, but they did not resist the call to come.

This was in fulfillment of Isaiah 60:6, and also an answer to the Psalmist's prayer:

"Herds of camels will cover your land,

young camels of Midian and Ephah.

And all from Sheba will come,

bearing gold and incense

and proclaiming the praise of the LORD." (Isa 60:6)

May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores

bring tribute to him.

May the kings of Sheba and Seba

present him gifts.

May all kings bow down to him

and all nations serve him. (Ps 72:10-11)

We can imagine their caravan arriving in the hustle and bustle of Jerusalem. People in the marketplace were going about their daily routine when they saw these strange foreigners and heard them asking with their thick Persian accent, "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."

This would have caused the crowds to buzz. It didn't take long before word got to Herod in the imperial palace that foreigners had arrived and were there to worship a recently born king of the Jews. Herod's initial response is given in verse 3:

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. (2:3)

The desire of the Magi to worship the King of the Jews was a clear and direct challenge to Herod's authority. He spent his entire political life elevating himself as King of the Jews, even though he was not Jewish. His focus was on accumulating and keeping power. No wonder he was "disturbed" at their arrival. As an Edomite, he would be especially threatened by a Davidic heir, who would automatically be more in favor with Jewish fundamentalists of the time.

Herod was renowned for his paranoia and cruelty. When he was disturbed, all Jerusalem trembled because they feared his irrational and murderous behavior. Every step of his ascent to the throne had been stained with the blood of his rivals. When he heard the rumors of still another rival, he took quick action.

Herod reacted to the news of the Magi's enquiry in two ways.

When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "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.'" (Matt 2:4-6)**

Herod summons the religious aristocracy and theological scholars familiar with the Old Testament prophecies to ascertain where, according to the scriptures, the promised Messiah would be born. They point him to the prophet Micah, who said that the Messiah would come from the little town of Bethlehem.

It's important to note that the religious leaders were quick to reply with the location of where the Messiah is to be born, but their search for the Savior ends there. These are learned men who knew the scriptures well. They knew that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but even though they knew the truth they did not act on it or investigate it. They simply went about their daily lives, until 30 years later when they could ignore Jesus no longer.

I confess I go through times when I'm like these religious leaders. I'm sorry to say that I can be indifferent to the nearness of Jesus. It is far too easy for me to get immersed in studying the scriptures and fail to respond to the presence of Jesus in the ordinary and seemingly insignificant moments of my daily life. My family is all too aware the week before I preach that I am not fully available to them. Even when I am with them, my mind is often elsewhere.

The Lord is patiently teaching me and helping me to be aware that when I do that, I miss out on witnessing and appreciating the miraculous presence of Jesus in my family and friends. The brief encounters I have with them are a blessing from God, because God is there in our midst. He is present. I pray that I will be more available to not only study the written word, but worship the living Word who is always near.

Herod gets the information he wants from the religious leaders. He now knows the town where the promised Messiah could be found, but he wants to know more, so he summons the Magi.

Then 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 make a careful search for the child. As soon as you

find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." (2:7-8)

Herod meets with the Magi to find out precisely when this special star first appeared. He hopes to get a clear idea of the age of this child who is his rival as king of the Jews.

Invited by King Herod to meet with him, the Magi witnessed all the pomp and grandiosity that an earthly king could muster. After entering his impressive palace and large courtyards, they would have come face to face with Herod high on his throne, surrounded by royal dignitaries. Everything he did was to impress and intimidate those around him.

Herod questions the Magi. He is careful enough not to arouse their suspicion, and cunning enough to make them believe he supports their quest. He tells them the child they seek can be found somewhere in the town of Bethlehem. Then he sends them on their way, demanding that as soon as they find the child they are to report back to him the exact location of his home. Of course, Herod had no intention to worship Jesus. He wanted to kill him.

The Magi were neither impressed nor intimidated by the earthly power and prestige of Herod, so they continued their search for the true king of the Jews.

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. 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 worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (2:9-12)

After leaving Herod, the Magi headed toward Bethlehem, just five miles outside Jerusalem. On their way, as night began to fall they were overjoyed to see the star appear before them once again. The star, this mysterious messenger, led them into town and eventually rested over a small house.

This leading star was obviously a miraculous occurrence. We are reminded of how the Lord "went ahead" of his people in Exodus (13:21), guiding them out of Egypt in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Once again we see God bringing salvation. He leads the way, guiding the Magi to Jesus. God intervened to bring these foreigners to Christ.

When they arrive, in stark contrast to the opulence of Herod, they find this king not in a palace surrounded by a royal court of dignitaries, but in an ordinary house with his mother. The Magi are not put off by the humble surroundings. They recognize Jesus for who he is...the King.

When they see the baby, they immediately fall on the ground and worship him. Matthew does not record the words that were spoken, but their gestures speak volumes. These foreigners do what the religious elite did not do. They acknowledge that Jesus is the true King, and they do so by their humble posture (lying prostrate) and with their treasures (gold, frankincense, and myrrh).

The gifts seem strange and somewhat impractical for a poor carpenter and his family. "Thomas Woolston once quipped that 'if they had brought sugar, soap, and candles they would have acted like wise men.'"¹ But these gifts were given to express reverence and respect.

Bringing gifts was particularly important in the ancient East when approaching a superior. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were precious resources worthy of giving to a king. Gold was an internationally recognized valuable, frankincense was often used as a perfume, and myrrh was commonly used as an anointing and embalming oil. Many have found

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symbolic value in the three gifts – gold suggesting his royalty, incense his divinity, and myrrh his Passion and burial.

The Magi gave their treasure as a sign of royal worship. Their ongoing devotion to this king is further demonstrated in their response to a dream given to them by the Lord. They were warned not to report back to Herod, so in obedience they returned home by a different route. Even with all his worldly power, Herod's plans and evil intentions were thwarted and overruled by God.

As I reflect on this passage, I can't help but wonder if we will respond any differently to Jesus as they did two thousand years ago. Will we be like Herod, rejecting Jesus' claim to be King over us? Do we perceive Jesus to be our enemy, our rival, a threat to our autonomy, and a menace who must be eliminated from our lives?

Will we be like the chief priests and teachers of the law? In our arrogance will we choose to ignore him? Will we be indifferent and apathetic to the presence of Christ in our midst? Do we know the truth about Jesus but refuse to worship?

Or will we be like the Magi, who sought after Jesus no matter the risk or cost? They were not in awe of the glamour and pretense of this world, but worshipped wholeheartedly the one born King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Out of adoration they offered to Jesus the very best of what they had.

The inclusion of the Magi from the beginning of Matthew's gospel carries the message to the whole of humanity that Jesus Christ has come as universal world Savior. We are all invited to participate in the story of Jesus. Although Jesus came as the King of the Jews, he came for everyone. Each and every one of us can present ourselves to Christ in worship.

My wife Amy teaches second and third graders at a local public school. Last Friday was the final day of school before the winter break. It is the tradition of many of the children to give gifts to their teachers, and one boy who comes from India presented Amy with a card he made himself. The outer flap says "Merry Christmas", and on the inside it says...

Christmas is...

Joyful
Enjoyable
Special
Universal
So much fun

Yes, Christmas is Jesus...and the universal nature of his kingship can be understood and appreciated even by the youngest among us.

The good news of Christmas is that God loves us so passionately that he humbled himself to the form of a baby, and dwelt among us to save us. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. It is my prayer this morning that whatever our response to Jesus has been in the past, we might now worship him, not just today and tomorrow, but every day. It is my hope that together we will kneel beside the Magi and open up our most precious treasure, gladly giving to the Lord our heart and life.

The English poet Christina Rossetti, in her Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*, put it well when she wrote,

What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part,
Yet what I can I give him,
Give my heart.

Heavenly Father, as we reflect on the Christmas story we thank you for the precious gift of your son Jesus. Thank you so much that we have the entire scriptures, and the testimony of saints throughout centuries, illuminating for us the way to Christ. We ask you for forgiveness for the times we have ignored Jesus and treated him as an interference and a threat. Thank you for the reminder today that from heaven to earth you came to save us, to set us free from the bondage of sin and death, from darkness and hopelessness. Thank you for the example of the Magi. May we, like them, seek after you with all our strength and worship you with all our heart.

1. From an article entitled "Biblical Magi," from Wikipedia.org, the free encyclopedia; a quote from Howard W. Clarke, *The Gospel of Matthew and its Readers: A Historical Introduction to the First Gospel*.

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