



WHERE IS HE WHO HAS BEEN BORN KING OF THE JEWS?

SERIES: ADVENT 2018

Matthew 2:1–12

Third Message

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December 16, 2018

The first two chapters of Matthew, like an overture to a symphony, highlight the major themes that will be further developed in his gospel. The questions he addresses—Who is this king? How can it be? Where is the king born? Where did he come from?—place Jesus front and center on Israel's stage as the climax and fulfillment of her hopes and dreams. Who is this Jesus? Matthew's answer is that he is without question the heir to David's throne. How can it be? The answer is that he was born of the Holy Spirit and therefore he is not just the son of David, but also the Son of God. In our text today Matthew answers the third question voiced by the magi, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"

The visit of the Magi following the star to Bethlehem and the humble homage they pay to Jesus is one of the most picturesque episodes in the Christmas story. John Stott describes it as "pure theatre—exotic Orientals in exotic clothes, bringing exotic gifts to the infant Christ."¹

*O star of wonder, star of night,
Star of royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.*

Over the centuries the story has suffered from being over sentimentalized and embellished with additions that are not in the text. When I was in sixth grade I was asked to audition to be one of the three "kings" for the school Christmas pageant. The thought of being a king, wearing a gold crown, thrilled me until I discovered I had to sing a solo (*We Three Kings of Orient Are*). After a few sour notes it became quite clear I was no candidate for American Idol and I was quickly demoted to the non-speaking role of a lowly shepherd. All of this may explain my lack of disappointment when, years later, I learned the Magi were not kings, they were wise men in search of a King, and there is no evidence that there were three. They brought three gifts, so it was later assumed there were three givers. And there was no stable or innkeeper; they came to a house and presented gifts to Jesus, who was not a newborn, but an infant.

Now don't throw away your Christmas crèche—it's not my desire to spoil your Christmas celebrations. But it is vital to separate fact from fiction and truth from tradition, especially when dealing with the Scriptures, which are God-breathed, making us wise to salvation (2 Tim 3:15–17).

In our text we are introduced to three divergent sets of characters that are brought together in their search for the King of the Jews: Herod the Great, Jerusalem's religious leaders, and magi who come from the east. Now if this was the Amazing Race and you were to wager a bet, Herod would be the odds-on favorite, for he has all the power. A close second would be Israel's religious leaders since they have all the information. But you would never suspect the Magi who, as foreigners, have no political power and, as astrologers, have only one piece of information—a bright light in the night sky, which is vague and ephemeral at best!

Because we are so familiar with how the story ends, it is easy to miss the incredible drama, political overtones, agonizing suspense and

twists of fate that turn Israel's political and religious world on its head. (One of the advantages of getting old I've discovered is that you can see a movie twice and still enjoy the ending!) So today I want us to encounter the story as if we are hearing it for the first time, and ask yourself: Which character do you identify with, and what is God's Spirit urging you do about it?

The Text: Matthew 2:1–12 ESV

1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

I. Herod the Great

The first character we meet is Herod the Great. Herod was not a Jew. His father was an Edomite and his mother an Arabian princess. The Romans put him on the throne and called him the "King of the Jews," but most Jews saw him as a usurper of the throne. In his book entitled *The Jesus Way*, Eugene Peterson gives us a masterful portrait of Herod:

Herod set the standard for the way to get things done in the world into which Jesus was born. At the pivot point in our calendars marked by Jesus' birth and Herod's death, Rome was well established as a world empire, the dominant military and political presence of the age. Herod reproduced that world of power, conspicuous consumption, and display on a smaller scale in Palestine. In reproducing it he was in no way inferior to Rome; in

some ways he out-did Rome. Every one of his palace complexes—he built seven of them—was larger than what any of the Caesars had in Rome... He ruled Palestine for thirty-four years. Politically he was able to manipulate power-hungry Rome, the many factions of religious Jews, and the swelling numbers of secularizing Hellenist Jews into a semblance of order and prosperity. He was not a religious man, but he turned out to be a relentlessly aggressive propagandist for Greek and Roman culture, using it as a means to political power: art and architecture, literary works and dramatic productions, athletic prowess and performance. His building projects were absolutely stunning—amphitheaters, hippodromes, palaces, shrines, fortifications, aqueducts, forums, roads, new and restored cities, fountains, and, his crowning achievement, the rebuilt Jerusalem temple. Herod was the biggest name in Palestine. He was the richest man in the world. He employed more people than anyone in the country... You couldn't walk down any road without coming on one of his massive building operations. Herod, Herod, Herod."²

As a usurper of the throne, Herod was extremely paranoid and lived in constant fear of any challenge to his rule or display of disloyalty. Anyone who challenged him wasn't just fired, they were killed.

During the last years of his life his proclivities to cruelty accelerated. He became a virtual monster, hated by everyone, massacring at whim. Executions were routine. He killed his favorite wife (of seven), Mariamne, his uncle Joseph, his mother-in-law Alexandra, and three of his sons: Aristobulus, Alexander and Antipater. He killed 46 members of the Sanhedrin. The famous quip from Caesar Augustus back in Rome, a close personal friend of Herod's, would have served as an apt epitaph over his grave: "I would rather be Herod's pig (*hys*) than his son (*huio*)."³ [Because at least the dietary laws would protect me!]

With that background in mind you can well imagine Herod's initial reaction when word came that foreign dignitaries were arriving from the east. Given his unrivaled architectural achievements, I suspect he imagined himself as the new Solomon, who would be lauded with gifts and praised as the Queen of Sheba did Solomon (1 Kings 1:10-10). Imagine his shock and disappointment when the Magi innocently ask the king of the Jews, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" Mathew says, "He was **troubled** and all Jerusalem with him." (v. 3) "Terrified" would be a more accurate translation.⁴

But Herod's fears have just begun. When he summons the religious leadership they inform him that the prophet Micah announced that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), David's birthplace, and append to it a verse about David: "You shall be shepherd of my people Israel" (2 Sam 5:2b). Those words were spoken to David when all the tribes of Israel came to unite under his rule and acknowledge that even "when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel" (2 Sam 5:2a). Had the scribes read the entire verse to Herod, not to mention the full context of Micah 5:1-4, they might have been killed on the spot.

**They will strike Israel's ruler
on the cheek with a rod.
But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times...
He will stand and shepherd his flock
in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.**

**And they will live securely, for then his greatness
will reach to the ends of the earth.** (Micah 5:1b-2, 4)

Bethlehem is not only significant as the birthplace of David, but as an ominous announcement of the reversal of power, that the insignificant and the lowly will replace the proud and the wicked. To make his point, Matthew makes a slight change in text of Micah. Bethlehem ("the house of bread"), once too insignificant to be counted among the clans of Judah is now, with the birth of Jesus, "by no means least among the rulers of Judah, who will shepherd my people Israel" (v. 6). Such a reversal of power is nothing new in the "way" God's kingdom erupts on earth. After the birth of Samuel, Hannah gave it its classical formulation in a song that wrote history.

**Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble bind on strength.
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low and he exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,
and on them he has set the world.
He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,
for not by might shall a man prevail.
The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;
against them he will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king
and exalt the horn of his anointed.** (1 Sam 2:3-10)

Herod felt the threat was significant enough to order the death of all male children under two in Bethlehem—the most horrific of all his crimes. Josephus states that shortly after this event, a "violent" and "loathsome" disease descended upon him "by God's judgment for his sins."⁵

So what do we learn from Herod? Herod's life teaches us that you can be a self-made man or woman, wield tremendous power and influence, be excessively rich and seemingly on top of your game, successful for decades—but without a relationship with God, none of it will stand. Just like the Tower of Babel, the Egyptian pyramids, and all the greatness that comes from self-serving endeavors, you'll notice that these are often a covering for sin. And that sin will be judged. Psalm 2, which was the king's coronation speech, begins with a rhetorical question: "Why do the nations' rage and the peoples plot in vain?" (v. 1) The question vents the poet's amazement and indignation at the stupidity of the kings of the earth united in their rebellion against the LORD and his Messiah. The poet continues, "He who sits in heavens laughs" (v. 4). He has installed his king on Mount Zion and is going to give him the nations as his inheritance through prayer (vv. 6-9). The psalm ends with a severe warning that all kings and rulers

are accountable to serve the Son, because he is Lord of all. Everything they do in office will be judged, not by a political agenda, but by justice. Everyone is called to account—every politician, accountant, lawyer, CEO, manager, priest and rabbi. They will all be judged, and it's the calling of the church to be prophets, bringing all to account.

II. The Religious Leaders

Though the religious leaders have all the information yet, ironically, they have the smallest part in the play. These scholars know the scrolls. Being experts in the Law and Prophets they know the time (490 years after the destruction of the Temple, Daniel 9:26) and place (Bethlehem, Micah 5:2) of the Messiah's birth. And yet with all that knowledge they do nothing about it. They have vast amounts of knowledge about God, but no relationship with God. They don't even seek the Messiah.

It is not enough, observes N. T. Wright, to say one's prayers in private, maintain high personal morality, and then go to work to rebuild the tower of Babel. The substance and structure of the different aspects of our world need to be integrated in the light of the unique achievement of Jesus.⁶

I would agree. It's not enough to come to church on Christmas or on Sundays. We are to integrate Jesus Christ into every aspect of our lives. The fate of the religious leaders was the same as Herod's, but came 40 years later in the destruction of Jerusalem. In the book of Revelation, in the letter to Laodicea, Jesus said,

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:15–17).

God can deal with the prodigals, with the people who either hate him or love him, but he cannot deal with lukewarm people. So if you are religious, just acquiring information but not doing anything with it, you will end up like the religious leaders.

III. The Magi

A. Their origin

In bold contrast to Herod and the religious leaders are the Magi. R. T. France explains:

Magos, originally the title of a Persian priestly caste who played an important role in advising the king, was applied more widely to learned men and priests who specialized in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. Magi were found all over the Roman world but were specially associated with Babylonia.⁷

Craig Chester adds, "Magi often wandered from court to court, and it was not unusual for them to cover great distances in order to attend the birth or crowning of a king, paying their respects and offering gifts."⁸

With large Jewish populations in Persia and Babylonia, it is quite probable they were familiar with Balaam's prophecy (not to mention Daniel's prophesies) that "a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Num 24:17). The ancient people appreciated the night sky. They didn't have any streetlights, of course. They had a sense that the whole world is interconnected, that what happens in the heavens affects earth, and what happens on earth can be seen in the heavens. For instance, at the announcement of the coming birth of Jesus, there was a rising star; at his death, darkness. At the resurrection, there was the earthquake. At Pentecost there was a huge wind and tongues of fire that came upon the apostles. We can't be certain what

the star was, though many suggestions have been offered. Tom Wright suggests:

More likely [than a comet or supernova] is the fact that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the 'royal' or kingly planet and Saturn sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born.⁹

France suggests, "The magi were presumably aware of Herod's royal position and perhaps assuming that a birth had occurred with his family, came to Jerusalem to find out more."¹⁰

B. What do the Magi teach us?

(For these points I am indebted to John Stott's sermon at All Souls Church, which I was privileged to hear in person in 1993. Ray Stedman called Stott the greatest expositor in the English language.)

1. No trouble was too difficult, nor distance too great to seek Jesus.

Think about this: The magi were wealthy, secure, well respected. They left the security and comfort of their homes to journey west to Jerusalem. It was by no means an easy journey. Depending upon whether they came from Babylon or Persia, they traveled 500 to 1000 miles and the journey would have taken several weeks. They endured the feverish heat by day and the cold by night, not to mention the threat of wild beasts and bandits. Despite their wealth and social status, their hearts were longing for something more—the truth. Their religions and their astrology weren't filling that vacuum in the heart. With but one sign of creation—ephemeral at that—they travel a thousand miles. They learned that creation alone couldn't save them; it had to be interpreted. And the only way they could interpret it was through the Scriptures, which were in Jerusalem. All they got from the Scriptures was one verse. In total obedience to one sign and one verse, they found Christ in Bethlehem...and they were rewarded with consummate JOY. This puts us to shame with respect to how much we have and how little we obey.

In comparison to the Magi our exertions in pursuit of truth seem weak and feeble. Most people are familiar with story of Jesus in our culture, but don't seek to verify the claims. They dismiss it without investigation. Have you read the New Testament? Often people come to Christ not because they have examined the evidence, but because they are attracted to friendly people, fellowship in a loving community, but their faith is not grounded in truth. When suffering comes these people have no root. My friend Daniel, a scientist, was an atheist. He investigated the truth of the Gospel for 10 years. The problem of being a scientist is the wrong views about what the Bible says about Creation. Well-meaning Christians think the Bible is a scientific document, but it's not. There are no errors in it, but it takes time to understand the different genres of Scripture, how and why it was written. As Galileo wrote, the Bible doesn't tell us how the heavens go, it tells us how to go to Heaven. It doesn't answer the "how" questions of Creation, it answers the "who" and the "why." Daniel spent 10 years investigating this, but he now has a solid, grounded faith. If you are investigating Jesus Christ, don't make a rash, emotional decision. Read, get grounded, and then make your decision.

In summary, the Magi teach us that no trouble was too difficult, nor distance too great to seek Jesus. Secondly, no people, nation or tribe is excluded from having a personal a relationship with him.

2. No people is too alien to come to Jesus.

The "King of the Jews" was recognized and honored first not by his own people, but by wealthy dignitaries, foreigners. They were representative of the "many" who were later to come from the east

and the west to take their place in the kingdom of heaven (8:11) and this appropriately set the scene for the ministry of the Israelite Messiah who would both be rejected by his own people and send out his disciples to recruit from all nations.¹¹ Jesus is not just King of the Jews, but King and Savior of the whole world. John Stott affirms this truth:

As pluralism spreads throughout the world today—pluralism is the ideology that all religions have equal validity—we need to remember that all non-Christian religions are ethnic religions. That is to say they are limited to a particular people in a particular culture. Hinduism is almost entirely restricted to Indian people, Buddhism to people in other parts of Asia, Confucianism to the Chinese culture; Shintoism to the Japanese culture; Judaism is almost entirely restricted Jews; and Islam to those of Arabic descent or to those conquered by Islam. Only Christianity among all the religions of the world is not an ethnic religion. It is a world faith.¹²

One of my greatest joys as a young pastor was travelling the world with Ray Stedman for pastor training conferences. More than teaching the pastors, I loved worshipping with them in all these other cultures. It was so inspiring!

In summary, the Magi teach us that no trouble was too difficult, nor distance too great to seek Jesus. Second, no people, nation or tribe is excluded from having a personal relationship with him; and third, no offering is too precious to give to him.

3. No offering is too precious to give to him.

When the Magi enter the house and saw the child with Mary his mother, “they down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (v. 11). Think of the beauty of this moment: The Magi brought him luxurious gifts for a king. For these foreign dignitaries to prostrate themselves in homage before a child in an ordinary house in Bethlehem reveals that when God’s kingdom comes to earth, it turns the world upside down. I first felt the immensity of God’s gift the year my son died. It was Christmas, and I’ll never forget thinking: “I would not have chosen to do this. I did not choose to give my son. You chose to do this for me. You gave your Son.”

Luke concludes the scene: “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” (verse 12). Their route home, just like their arrival, is supernaturally directed, “take another way.” There is more to those words than the surface meaning. From that time in their lives, they would always be travelling to a different way. As T.S. Eliot expressed it in his poem, “Journey of the Magi:”

A cold coming we had of it,
just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
the ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter...

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was

Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.¹³

The question we began with was: Where is He who is born King of the Jews? The answer is Bethlehem. The fact that the Messiah was born in the Davidic town of Bethlehem identifies him as the Royal Son, to whom all nations shall come and worship and “the wealth of nations shall come and...gold and frankincense, and they shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD” (Isa 60:5-6). So what does God want from us? He really doesn’t care about our money. He wants something more precious—our heart. John Stott concluded his sermon with a story about teaching a group of fifth graders the book of John. Since they a very intelligent group, he decided to give them a little test and included a personal question at the end. He asked, “In John 1, Andrew brought Simon to Jesus, Philip brought Nathaniel. Who have you brought to Jesus?” A little 10-year-old girl wrote: “I brought myself. That’s all I had to give.” So it’s my prayer that every one of you will give your heart to Christ, holding nothing back. Give him that precious gift of yourself and receive the light and the joy that the Magi had.

1. John Stott, “The King who is Shepherd,” https://allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=51253&show_file=59317
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Way of Jesus, A Conversation on the Ways that Jesus is the Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 201-202, 198.
3. Peterson, *The Way of Jesus*, 202-206.
4. “Trouble” (tarassō) — “the passive is always used in the NT in a negative sense, connoting emotional disturbance: to become terrified (Matt 2:3; 14:26; Mk 6:50; Lk 12:12; 24:38). H. Müller, “Stir up, Trouble, Agitate,” *NIDNTT*, 3:710.
5. Josephus 17.6.5
6. Quoted by Philip E. Eaton, *SPU Response* (Seattle: Seattle Pacific Publications, Summer 2005), 7. Quoted by Peterson, *The Way of Jesus*, 206.
7. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 66.
8. Craig Chester, “The Star of Bethlehem,” *Imprimis*, December 1996 Volume 25, Number 12.
9. N. T. Wright, *Matthew For Everyone, Part 1*, (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2004) 10.
10. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 68.
11. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 67.
12. Stott, “The King who is Shepherd.”
13. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1962), 69-70.