**Matthew 2:1-12** January 8, 2023

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*Matthew 2:1After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2and asked, “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.” 3When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: 6‘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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.’” 7Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8He 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.”*

*9After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11On 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 and of incense and of myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The Magi asked, ***“‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.”*** Why? Were the people of Jerusalem so concerned for their beloved king that they sympathetically shared any anxiety he felt? Let me give you the long answer.

A hundred sixty years before the Magi showed up in Herod’s palace, the Jews were in their promised land, but they did not rule themselves. They were ruled by the King of Syria, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, to be precise. His was a cruel regime. He tried to wipe the Jewish religion off the face of the earth, which led to a massive Jewish revolt. A Jewish family called the Hasmoneans led the revolt and succeeded. In case you ever wonder what Hannukah is about, basically, that’s it.

However, this liberating family, the Hasmoneans, went on to set themselves up as the new Jewish royal family and became the new oppressors. Jewish infighting followed and eventually an invasion by the Romans. The Romans took over and unrest continued. Finally a man named Herod (same guy as in our reading; *not* a Jew) promised the Romans that he would pacify the region. After some measure of success he traveled to Rome and in Rome the Roman Senate declared Herod, “King of the Jews.” That’s the title they gave him: “King of the Jews.” It’s all historically documented.

Well, the Jews were not impressed. They hated the thought of this foreigner ruling them. Civil war continued. Herod spent the next decade fighting Hasmonean claimants to the throne. By 30BC Herod had hunted down and eliminated the last of them. Though no one in Judea loved him, none dared challenge Herod’s Senate-given title, “King of the Jews.”

Then about 25 years later some wise men waltz into Herod’s palace and ask him, ***“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”*** Now you understand why Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him.

This was the fallen world baby Jesus was born into. As the tempest surrounds Jesus, the message of Jesus shines out into the world. People hear and they respond. Today we hear how

**God’s People Respond to Christ Revealed**

**I.** These wise men are a well-known part of the Christmas story. Every Christmas Eve we read about them. Then on the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6, Epiphany, the account of the wise men is repeated every year. Yet I have neglected the wise men. In the eight years I have been pastor here, I have only once preached on this reading. Maybe I figured it was so familiar that you didn’t need to hear it again—I don’t know. Nevertheless, they have much to teach us.

So let’s begin by figuring out who these wise men are. They are also called Magi. They perhaps had some dabblings in astrology—not something we should be toying with. But then, throughout history people start their encounter with Jesus far away and are brought near to him.

How many wise men they are, we have no idea and it doesn’t matter. We know it was more than one. We have no reason to think they were kings—“We Three Kings of Orient Are” is a total and unlikely guess. We are not sure where they are from, only that they are from “the East:” maybe Arabia, maybe Persia, maybe somewhere else. Their ethnicity is never positively stated, only negatively implied in their question ***“Where is the King of the Jews?”*** They speak as outsiders to the Jewish king they seek. And, these Wise Men, as they were looking for the location of God’s chosen one did not think to search the Scriptures for his birth location. Even heathen Herod knew to do that much. The one thing we know is that these Wise Men were not of Jewish descent.

And that is just about the only thing we know about them—that they were not Jews, not Children of Israel, not children of the covenant. Yet this one thing is the thing that makes them so important because, you see, in that one detail, they and we were excluded from the covenant God made with Israel. There is no way we could have come close to worshiping the God of the Bible on such informal terms as these guys in this reading. By God’s Old Covenant, an outsider had to become a Jew to become one of God’s people. Gentiles didn’t just show up at the Jerusalem temple and say that they want to worship.

But these wise men did just that. They just showed up at Jesus’ house and worshiped. God’s grace is leaking out around the edges of the Old Covenant. It was a sign of what Jesus would bring. Through Jesus’ life and work, salvation was unleashed freely to the world.

Of course, we could go ahead and start putting up other walls. We could start thinking, “Well, you see, these Magi were respectable, respectful, intelligent, men of means, who followed through with the things they started. We like their sort, the respectable sort.” Yes, we do. We like their sort.

James was right on the mark when he said, *“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes… you have become judges with evil thoughts…”* (2:2). Only for us, it wouldn’t be a gold ring, but more like, “Did you see the car he has out in the parking lot?” Or after a Monday evangelism call to a Sunday visitor, “You should see the house they live in!” And so it happens that that one is followed up on more diligently than the other from the trailer park. (Of course, that can go two ways. Sometimes people favor the poor man and stand in judgment over a rich man who has more than the rest.)

The point is this… No, don’t let me tell you the point. Let me ask you a question: Whom would you have the most difficulty with if they sat in the pew in right front of you—right there in your line of sight for the entire worship service? Would it be a long-haired tattoo-covered 20-something? Or an older person, obviously set in their ways, of a vocal political view different from yours? Or a couple of another cultural background, whose ethnic group you sometimes run down? Or a man dressed in women’s clothing, who has pronoun expectations of you? Imagine them sitting there, and every time you want to look at the front of church, you have to look around them. It’s ruining your Sunday worship!

Would you have an issue with them? Would you remind yourself that at least they are in God’s house, but then add, “I just wish they wouldn’t sit right in my line of sight? *“Judges with evil thoughts”* James said.

Already shortly after Jesus’ birth, people were showing up who weren’t supposed to be showing up. But there they were. And God’s Word makes a point to record that they were there because God wanted them there, and he wants us to know that they are there.

So what would you say to that most problematic person in the world, who decides to sit in front of you. Well, if any of those thoughts were yours, the first thing you say is, “I am so so sorry!” to God. And remember that this sin too is forgiven in Christ our loving Savior.

And then you speak to them. You boil it down to what really matters: the one born king of the Jews, Son of David, Savior of Us All. You leave all the other stuff that doesn’t matter like tattoos and ethnicity totally out of the picture. It’s your problem, not theirs! And even the stuff that does matter like sinful lifestyles, you temporarily put those issues to the side until the most important thing of all is dealt with—that they know their Savior from sin. Because that is the thing they *need* to know.

Without Christ shining into all the dark corners of the world that we are born into, how can any of us be saved? There is a necessity to this, to welcoming in the one who is outside. The Apostle Paul displays the urgency when he asks, *“How can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”* (Rom. 10:14).

Here is one more thing that we should remember. To my knowledge, none of us are of Jewish descent. In this account of the wise men, we stand not on the side of Joseph, Mary and the shepherds, but on the side of the wise men, the outsiders brought in from the cold. Thank you, Lord!

When God’s people see Christ revealed, we are thankful for his great mercy in choosing us. That’s why we worship, we pray, we sing, we serve.

**II.** That is the substance of Epiphany: God’s work for us. Now watch the wise men from the east respond to what God has done.

What’s the longest you ever drove to get to a church service? Thirty minutes? An hour? Think about these wise men. The Bible doesn’t tell us where they are from, or how long they journeyed, but it does say that after they had worshiped Jesus, they ***“returned to their country by another route.”*** Here’s a math question: If after today’s church service you ***“returned to [your] country by another route”*** how many miles do you live from church?

Another thing: when they finally drew a bead on Jesus’ house, the NIV flatly states that the wise men were ***“overjoyed.”*** Actually King James Version says what the Greek says, they ***“rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”*** I’m not sure, but I think that means more than a high-five or fist bump.

They knock on the door of a one-room house—if you have a shed out back, it is probably about the size of Jesus’ first home. They find a mother of the peasant class with the baby supposedly ***“born king of the Jews.”*** Yet, far from disappointed, these wealthy, wise men drop knees and faces to the ground and worship him.

Ignoring the apparent lack of royalty, they unpack the treasures they have guarded over the miles. They present the child what is due a king by his subjects.

What’s is all about? What we are seeing in the wise men is called stewardship. They are utilizing their blessings in line with what God has done for them. This is how God’s people respond when God’s grace and truth is revealed to them.

They gave their time, treasure and talents; weeks of time, piles of wealth, and all their talents.

They gave, and they gave willingly—actually with ***“exceeding great joy.”*** They had no buyers remorse after giving the goods to the Christ-child.

And maybe most worth mentioning is that they gave proportionally. What is this proportional giving? If you see the offering plate coming your way and decide to put a 20 in, or even a hundred, that is well and good. You are giving with your heart. But are you giving with your mind? Giving with your mind means you think about your blessings and you decide to give to God in line with how he has blessed you. That is proportional giving. God loves it when people measure their blessings and give accordingly. How much is up to you, but God wants both your heart and your mind in giving. If you decide to give a tithe, that means with a take-home pay of $1,000 you give $100 of every pay check. If you get a pay raise to $1,500, then you give $150. If you decide on 5% to God, then you give $75. It’s not what’s left over at the end of the month, but a positive decision about how much to give. Whether you are wealthy or poor, proportional giving means you decide to give a percentage, as God has blessed you.

These are how God’s people respond to Christ revealed. We worship. We rejoice in others who worship. We give to him who has given so much. Amen.