

Matthew 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw His star at its rising and have come to do Him homage.”

When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd My people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.” After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary His mother. They prostrated themselves and did Him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

The Gospel of the Lord

Reflection Questions

- 1) **Context:** This Sunday we celebrate Epiphany, which means appearance, revelation or manifestation, as we commemorate and celebrate Christ's manifestation to the gentiles. Matthew's account of the nativity story differs from Luke's in some significant ways (both in terms of what it highlights and what it omits). Matthew emphasizes the presence of the Magi instead of the shepherds; instead of the stable, Matthew shows us Herod's palace; instead of the manger, Matthew shows us the gifts meant for a king, instead of angels, Matthew emphasizes dreams. Matthew's account of the nativity story also includes many more of the darker or less pleasant events that surround the coming of the Christ child; 1) Joseph decides to put Mary away quietly (before he is visited by the angel), 2) Herod kills all boys under 2 yrs old in hopes of getting rid of the new born king, 3) Joseph, Mary and Jesus have to flee to Egypt to escape Herod's murderous wrath, 4) when the holy family returns from Egypt they have to go to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem because a different violent king was ruling Judea at that time (2:19-23). It is also interesting to note the various parallels between the life of Moses and the beginnings of the life of Jesus (compare passages; Exod. 1:16, 22 with Matt. 2:16-18; Exod. 2:1-10, 15 with Matt. 2:11, Exod. 4:19 with Matt. 2:19-20). These stories come alive in new ways when we read Matthew Chapter 2 in light of Exodus Chapters 1-2. Matthew, who is writing for the Jewish community (the synagogue across the street), is very intentional about wanting the reader to connect Jesus as a figure who was sent by God to set all of humanity free and Moses who was chosen by God to set the Israelites free.

- 2) Verse one tells us that the Magi from the East travel all the way to Jerusalem to ask the Jewish religious leaders about the location of the baby king of the Jews. These Magi (Greek Magoi—where we get our word magic) were probably members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia. They were astrologers who studied the stars in order to tell kings and rulers the will of God that was manifesting in the stars. Jewish people would have looked down upon these people, as pagans who looked for answers from the stars; answers that they should have been seeking from God alone. There is a great irony in this verse. The Magi who are not considered to engage in unorthodox practices by Jewish standards are more eager to find and meet the Christ Child (Savior of the Jewish people) than the Jewish leaders are. They have traveled a great distance and are willing to go further in order to pay homage to this new born king. Which people (or groups of people in the 21st century) have we been at risk of looking

down upon because they do not match our ideas of an observant religious person? In what ways have we been taught by an 'unlikely' person what it means to have an earnest and eager pursuit of Christ?

- 3) Verses 3-6 in this passage tell us that Herod is frightened along with all of Jerusalem about the news of the Christ Child's birth. Herod's antidote to his fear is to begin to plot the child's death by consulting with the chief priests and scribes about the child's whereabouts. Matthew writes this gospel from the perspective of Christ's whole life story (cross and resurrection) and so foreshadows the vicious plots against Christ's life at the end of His life with plots by the Jewish leaders to get rid of Him soon after His birth. Matthew informs us that all of Jerusalem is frightened by the birth of the Christ Child and that the Jewish leaders in their fear will aid Herod in his murderous plan by telling him where the Christ Child is to be born. There are several layers of irony here. Christ is born in a stable (e.g. humble and vulnerable circumstances), Herod lives in a palace; Christ is a helpless infant, Herod is a powerful king; Jesus will offer the world peace and compassion, Herod is filled with fear and violence. From an outsider's perspective it seems as though Herod in all his power should have nothing to fear and yet he is almost entirely consumed by fear; fears that will lead him to murderous aggression (enough to kill every male child 2yrs old and under from the entire region). In what ways do worldly power bases still respond in fear and aggression to the loving transformative power that Christ offers the world?
- 4) Herod needs to know the exact location within Jerusalem that the Christ child is to be born in order to ensure an effective murder. So he asks the wise men/ Magi (the astrologers) to search out, find the child and tell him where He is. The wise men their earnestness, unaware of Herod's evil intentions, agreed to let him know. There is another layer of irony here; the ones who are truly interested to pay the Child King homage (e.g. the Magi) are pagans who have little to no understanding of what a 'Messiah' is. The people (e.g. the Jews and Jewish leaders) who have awaited the Messiah for generations through various prophecies are now so fearful at His arrival that they want Him dead. How ironic that the people through whom God's Son is sent to bless the world want Him dead upon arrival. The Jewish leaders (Herod in particular) are so caught up in their love for their own religious power that they can only see the Christ Child's arrival as a threat to their own status/power. They are so busy worshipping the idols of their own power and position that they are unable to worship the presence of God in their midst. (Not only are they unable to worship Him but they want Him dead). Where do we see these kinds of dynamics in our world today? In

what ways do worship of idols (e.g. power, status, position) threaten to undermine a person's capacity to worship the living God?

- 5) It is interesting to note that the Magi were dependent upon Jewish prophetic tradition in the scriptures (e.g. Micah 5:2, 2 Samuel 5:2) to discover the town in which the Christ Child was to be born. Herod, the scribes and chief priests on the other hand, were dependent upon the Magi to show them the exact location within that town where Jesus would be born by the Magi's ability to read the stars. God connected these two very different groups of people (with two completely different origins and two opposing intentions towards the Christ Child) in order to accomplish the "Epiphany/ revelation/manifestation" of His Son to the world that He desires. God uses unusual instruments (e.g. pagan people) through which to show the world His Son. It would almost be the equivalent of God today using tarot card readers, or astrologers (horoscope people) to point to the advent of His Second Coming. This story does not highlight the practice of astrology as much as it highlights the earnest desire of the Magi's hearts and their willingness to follow a moving star until it stopped. God used an unusual force of nature to bring the Magi to the place of Christ's birth, but He also used an unusual force of love and earnest human desire to lead them there. How does God continue to use these forces (e.g. unusual circumstances...and movements of the heart) as well as some unlikely people to lead us to Christ?
- 6) The Magi, unbeknownst to themselves, become the humble servants of the Most High God. God accomplishes great things through these pagan men: through their willingness to follow their hearts' desire to meet the Christ Child, their willingness to travel all the way to Jerusalem to ask about the town, through their willingness to follow the star, through their willingness to offer gifts fit for a king and through their obedience in listening to their dream not to return to Herod. God accomplishes great things through these humble, loving, obedient pagan men. They arrive at the site because they are willing to follow a moving star until it stops.

Upon arrival they pay Him homage by prostrating themselves before Him, bring Him expensive gifts and then obey their dream not returning to Herod. God uses the combination of mysterious circumstances, holy desires and the obedience of these men to accomplish His plans. The gifts may seem irrelevant to a baby (e.g. we might ask why they did not bring diapers and some bottles) but the expensive gifts offered most likely sustained the Holy Family financially during their flight into Egypt. Their willingness to travel all the way from the Far East

and their obedience not to return to Herod but instead return to the Far East via another route, accomplished God's purposes by giving the Holy Family plenty of time to escape to Egypt and allowed them to bring the message of God's Son to the Far East unencumbered. When has God used strange sets of seemingly bizarre circumstances in your life to accomplish His will? When have you unknowingly been used by God (viewing it from a 20/20 hindsight perspective)?