

Matthew 2 . 1 - 6

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

As I look back on the many Christmas seasons that my family and I have experienced, at different churches, going back to 1981, I realize that there is someone I have neglected. I have decided that they will not be neglected this year. They are the Wise Men, the Magi, who end up somehow being called the Three Kings. I would like to have Kristina take us directly to some goodies that I found regarding these Wise Men/Kings. But first, let me provide this background for us.

We should all know enough about our Apostolic Writings, ( *otherwise known as the **New Testament*** ), we should know enough about them to know that out of 27 total books, we only have what we would call *Christmas information* in 2, although it is more like 1, that being the Gospel of Luke. In Luke we learn about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, we find our beautiful “songs” which we call Magnificat, Benedictus, and Nunc Dimittis. We find angels and shepherds, and no room in the inn, and a baby born in a food trough where animals eat.

We find Mother Mary holding her baby wrapped in raggedy cloths. Christmas that we know really comes from Luke. We should know this. But there is another story.

Matthew has a different story for us. There are no angels present, only in dreams. Matthew tells us about a Star, and Magi, and about a gangster false king named Herod. He tells us about violence committed against babies and toddlers. He tells us of an escape to Egypt. But mainly he tells us about these men we call the Wise Men.

First we have some pictures to see, which Kristina has found for us. And now we have three bits of information that you can share with others. We will see these slides now.

These “Magi” are only found in the Gospel of Matthew. And in what we could see as a mini-Christmas story in Matthew, these Magi are the center of the story, along with the star and the baby. There is no manger here, as Jesus is in a house. There are no shepherds or other animals.

Originally, in Matthew’s Greek, the word “Magos” or Magoi ( plural ) meant star gazers, or magicians, interpreters of dreams and other magical arts. But by the 3rd century the story switches to them being “kings,” possibly because of a reference in Psalm 72.11 which says

***“May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service...”***

By the 8th century these **Kings** get named.

The first is **BALTHASAR** who is said to be king of Arabia.

Then we have **MELCHIOR** who is king of Persia.

And finally we have **GASPAR** who is king of India.

So, now we know more about how these mysterious men from the East developed over time. And I think it is fair to say

that they did in fact develop. Being transformed from crystal ball gazers and star watchers to becoming kings is quite a great change! But for our sake today, in this year of 2020, we cannot just treat these men like a novelty. There is something very important here that must speak to us directly. And it all revolves around one question: *According to this story, Who are these men, and how much effort did these men put in to accomplish what they wanted to accomplish? How hard did they have to try?* And can we take a lesson from them? How hard do we try?

A very serious bit of information that we must know about the time when Jesus was born was that there was a wealthy gangster, who had many palaces and his own army, and he called himself “Herod the Great.” He called himself the “king” of Judaea, even though he was not Jewish. Technically he was an Arab, from a place called Idumea. He was not from the family of King David. His father had been a ruler before him, and his three sons take over after he dies, so that grown up Jesus has to deal with them. Herod was a ruthless, powerful man. When he took power in Jerusalem, he had 45 wealthy aristocrats executed because they did not show him support. He appointed his nephew to be the High Priest, but when he became too popular, Herod had him drowned in his pool in Jericho. You were not permitted to be more popular than the Great one! Herod is the one who took over the High Priest position. It would be filled with someone that he hired for the job.

Are we starting to get a picture here of what Jerusalem and Judaea were like at the birth of Jesus? Herod is a mob boss, a total gangster. He is not afraid to kill. People survived by being afraid of him. So there are things that Matthew will tell us that everyone back then would have known. When these foreigners from the East ( Anatolia ) come looking for a new king, that is the wrong question to be asking! You do not ask the mob boss about the new baby born to put him out of business. Remember that this guy is a killer, literally. The people of Jerusalem, already living with a gangster in charge, are afraid of everything. Could it be true that God was sending someone to rescue them, from the Romans, and from this gangster?

Matthew does not tell us the names of these Magi. He just tells us that they have come a long way to visit. Somehow they, who are far away from Jerusalem, they seem to know something very special that many other people do not know. They are coming to see someone who has been born who will change the world. Fortunately Herod does not just execute them on the spot. That might have been his normal way of doing things. Instead like a normal gangster, he intends to use the Magi to get information. They will go to Beth-Lehem, a town in Judah, the area of King David's birth. They are to report what they find back to Herod. Herod will then send some assassins, and the problem will be solved, by some people being killed. But angels have been contacting people in their dreams. First they contact Joseph, who is rarely mentioned. Then they have a warning for the Magi, who take that advice. After seeing Jesus, they head

back to the East by a different way. And they stay far away from the gangster in Jerusalem. Joseph is then warned again in a dream to escape with the family to Egypt.

There will be other dreams and other warnings. But the Magi escape from Herod. Their mission has been successful, and they are quickly on the road home. It might seem that the story is over for them at this point. They can go on to be changed to kings and named at a later time. But if we do this, we miss the most important thing about their presence in this story: we need to understand that the world will change, and that they are the first ones to symbolize the change that is coming. Are these men, Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar, are these men Jewish? No, not at all. They are 100% Gentile. They are a part of the giant world that knows nothing of the God of Israel. They know nothing of Creation, Abraham and promises made to the him and the world, the Exodus, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, on and on. They know none of this. But this is getting ahead of ourselves. Yes, a Jewish baby is born. And he will do something amazing. He will be the one to open the door so that non-Jewish people like ourselves could be connected to this God of Israel, and to be connected without becoming Jewish ourselves.

Have we connected these dots before? The Magi represent the first people ever to come to Judaea to connect to Jesus who will connect them directly to God. That is simply the greatest thing ever, and we are the ones blessed by this. I will always look at this story, from now onward, being profoundly moved by two

things: First, they are the first Gentiles to start the new connection through Jesus to the God of Israel. And second, they had to put in some effort to make this journey. They had to be careful with a gangster. Fortunately an angel warned them about the evil of Herod, so they made it out with their lives when many others did not.

My hope is that from now on, when you drive past a manger scene in someone's yard, when you see the Wise Men Three, you will remember what an effort they had to make. Maybe it will make you wonder about how much effort you make to be connected to God, and to deepen your faith and hearts. Also, I hope that every Wise Man out there will remind you of what we celebrate in January, on Epiphany, but we are highlighting here today: These Magi were the ones who opened the doors for us to know the God of Life. I think we should thank them for that. They symbolize us. As Ephesians 2 would remind us

*<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

We had **no hope**, we were **without God** in the world. And the Wise Men were the first ones to experience this new situation. This is the good news, is it not? May our faith and understanding deepen as we make our way through Advent. AMEN.

