

Let every heart: The Magi \* Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Eve \* December 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

We've heard the story. We've heard how the holy baby was born to a virgin girl and laid in a manger. We've heard how the angels sang His glory. We've heard how the shepherds ran to see Him. We've heard how the wise men travelled far to worship Him.

The question that remains for us tonight is 'what are WE going to do about this baby born in a manger?' Jesus was born – God took on flesh and dwelt among us to be the atoning sacrifice that brings us back into relationship with God – what are we going to do about it? That's what I want to think about here tonight.

So join me in Matthew 2, starting in verse 1, and I want to look at the account of the three wise men and point out three ways that they respond to Jesus. Those three ways are good ways for US to respond to Jesus too so let's look at their story. Matthew 2, starting in verse 1.

Matthew 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...

Matthew is setting the scene for us; he's introducing us to the characters who will shape the drama surrounding the events of Jesus' birth.

So first, we have King Herod.

You know how in the Lion King, Scar takes the throne after Mufasa dies? Scar becomes the king in a shady kinda way, nobody likes him because he shouldn't really BE king, and he has malevolent plans and minions to carry them out?

That's Herod. Herod was not technically Jewish but Rome had made him king of the Jews nonetheless and he reigned with an iron fist and a twisted sense of good and evil and the uncomfortable realization that he had no right to be king.

Which made it really awkward when a group of Magi showed up asking 'where is this newborn king of the Jews' *who will eventually take your place?*

These guys go by many different names – 'we three kings,' the three wise men, the magi – essentially they were Persian or Babylonians scholars who studied the heavens to make sense of the earth. They had this idea that the stars in the sky pointed to great historical events on earth and so when they saw this brilliant star up in the sky, hanging out in the direction of Jerusalem, they decided that it must mean that a new Jewish king was on the way. You can see that in verse 2. They come to Herod and say:

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star [while we were] in the east and have come to worship him."

When they saw this extraordinary star up in the sky, they took it to mean that an extraordinary person had been born and they undertook an extraordinary journey to find Him.

We don't know exactly where they started out but our best guess is that that they travelled more than a thousand kilometers to find Jesus. That's like travelling from here to Quebec City on foot. In fact, I actually tried asking Siri for walking directions just to see how long it would take and she was like 'Walking direction not available' – what are you, stupid? It's a long journey by foot, where you'd need to carry much of your food with you, your water, your fodder for animals, no drive-thrus to stop at when you get hungry.

But when these wise men saw that there was someone important on the way, they went to great lengths to find Him.

And that's the first way that we respond to Jesus' birth – we seek Him out.

You've probably seen the signs on peoples' lawns – wise men seek Him still – it's true.

This baby in a manger will grow up to pay for our sin, to restore us to God and to give us the privilege of walking with Him now into eternity. It is worth seeking Him out.

Getting ready for this message, I came across an article online called 'How I'm planning to see Taylor Swift's Eras Tour in Europe' (<https://thriftytraveler.com/guides/travel/taylor-swift-eras-tour-europe-trip/>). Apparently this person couldn't get tickets in the States and so she was planning to fly from Minneapolis to Paris to Munich with maybe a stop in Iceland to see Taylor Swift sing 'Shake it off.'

If it's worth it for that, it's worth seeking out the baby in the manger, the Saviour of the World.

How do we do that? Well, first, we make a conscious decision to direct our hearts toward God, to invest time into finding out who He is.<sup>1</sup> Whether you've known Jesus all your life or you're just starting this journey, you calm your heart and read His Word and listen for Him speaking into your heart.

Jesus is more than willing to be found by anyone who is willing to seek. Jesus very famously said "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7 NIV). We respond to Jesus the same way as the Magi; we seek Him out.

So that's the first way we respond to Jesus. We seek Him out.

Let's go back to the story.

Verse 2, the Magi came from the East and asked King Herod 'where is this child who has been born King of the Jews?'

To the magi, this was an innocent question. In fact, I suspect that they would have expected Herod to say, 'upstairs, in the cradle; his mother's taking care of him.'

That was not his reaction though, was it? Verse 3:

3 When King Herod heard this [that there was another King who could challenge his very dubious claim to the throne] he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

He knew that he was not the rightful king of the Jewish people and now these foreign dignitaries showed up looking for the real king of the Jewish people and he was 'disturbed.' Yet again, another understatement in the Nativity stories. I'm sure Herod was outright furious. And when Herod was outright furious, you stayed out of his way.

During his lifetime, he murdered his favourite wife, her mother and grandfather, his brother-in-law, three of his sons and a high priest. On his deathbed, he left orders that when he died, a thousand Jewish community leaders were to be murdered too so that people would technically be mourning his death. No wonder all of Jerusalem was disturbed with him. What's this tyrant going to do?

But, it seems that Herod was just as cold and calculating as he was bloodthirsty and so it turns out that he decided to play along with the magi and find out where the baby was.

4 When 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.' "

Now let's camp there for just a minute because this tells us a couple of things. First, it tells us a lot about who Jesus is. He was born in Bethlehem, we know that; but he was also born to be a ruler. He was born to have authority, sovereignty, power. He was born to rule over His people.

And yet look at how this passage says He will rule over them. He will be the *shepherd* of my people Israel. He will not be a fearsome tyrant like Herod; He will be a gracious leader, looking out for His people, like a shepherd. He will lead His people, He will guide His people, He will protect His people, He will provide for His people. He will go off to find those who have gone astray and as the Good Shepherd, He will lay down His life to rescue the sheep. The OT passage that they quote here (Micah 5:2, 1 Samuel 5:2) tells us that Jesus would be and was always intended to be a compassionate and saving Shepherd King. That is the kind of person that I want watching over me. So first, this tells us that Jesus is a 'shepherd.'

Second it tells us that the wise men were willing to learn. Think about this. As Magi, they are at the top of the academic totem pole back in the East. They are the wisest of the wise, the smartest of the smart, the most learned men of their day.

And yet they have the humility to admit that there are some things that they don't know and they are willing to put themselves into the position of the student to learn knowing that what they're learning is good. The star could only get them so far; they needed to go to the OT Scriptures to find out exactly who and where the Saviour was.

And that I think is a second example that they set for us too. They show us to respond to Jesus by learning from Him. By admitting that there are things that we don't understand and being willing to learn from God in the Bible.

I had this conversation with a guy who came into the house to put down some flooring for us. He found out that I was a pastor and he said 'can you explain this to me? Why is the world so bat-sh—crazy?' He looked around and said 'why are we all mixed up?' And I said 'we as a culture are doing what's right in our own eyes. We've stopped caring about what God says is good and we've just decided that know best. We've blown right past admitting that there are things we don't understand and decided that God has nothing to teach us that's better than what we ourselves come up with. And that's how we've ended up here.

What we *need* to do and what the Magi model for us is being willing to learn from God who He is, what's right and wrong, how we can grow and thrive in this world that He has made and made us for. We respond to Jesus by learning from Him.

We respond to Jesus by seeking Him; we respond to Jesus by learning from Him. Let's go back to the story to see the third response. Verse 7.

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

8 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."

What do you think? Does Herod want to 'worship' Him? I suspect there's about a hundred things that Herod wants to do to this rival to the throne and none of them is worship. But the Magi want to worship Him. And so, verse 9 –

9 After 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...

11 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 and of incense and of myrrh.

You've probably seen the pictures on Facebook – if the Magi were really wise, they would have brought diapers and bum cream and wine – but to be frank, gold, frankincense and myrrh were very valuable gifts. They're so valuable in fact that only royalty could afford them, which is why some people started calling the magi the three kings. To Mary and Joseph, living on a carpenter's salary, this is years' worth of wages.<sup>ii</sup>

But the gifts here aren't nearly as important as the heart with which they were given. The Magi came to worship Him. Our Bibles say they 'knelt down to worship Him;' the language is literally like they fell down in adoration to honour this baby for who He is. They worshiped Him. They honoured Him. They humbled themselves before Him to say 'You are unlike ANY Other in the world.' And their worship didn't start when they found the baby; it started when they first saw the star and decided to devote time and money and effort into finding the King to worship Him.<sup>iii</sup>

And that's an example that the Magi set for us. We respond to Jesus by worshiping Him.

We respond to Jesus by saying 'You are worthy to receive all of the glory and honour and praise.' By putting our time and our talents and belongings at His service for His Kingdom.

Just think about this. There was a moment when the second person of Trinity was hanging out in Heaven, surrounded by perfect holiness, utter glory and the next moment He opened His eyes and there was nothing but wood and straw in the flicker of fire light. The smell of animals in the air.

All things were created by him and for him (Col 1:16 NIV) and yet He chose to enter into His Creation to live a perfect life and to die a sacrificial death so that we could be transformed from sinners estranged from God to beloved and treasured children of God. 'All we like sheep have gone astray' but Jesus came to be the Good Shepherd who would bring us back to God.

That deserves honour. That deserves praise. That deserves a life that is lived to the glory of God.

That is how we respond to the news of Jesus.

We follow the magi by seeking Him, by learning about Him and by worshiping Him.

As we conclude tonight, I want to invite you to close your eyes and imagine that we are there in the stable with Mary and Joseph and the Magi and the Saviour. The light is low; the flames are flickering, there is a sense of excitement in the air. What do you hear? What do you see? What do you feel? What does your heart say about this baby Shepherd King?

Seek Him. Learn about Him. Worship Him.

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<sup>i</sup> A helpful resource here is <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-does-it-mean-to-seek-the-lord>

<sup>ii</sup> And it's these gifts that are going to fund their emergency escape down to Egypt when Herod finally gets around to 'worshiping' Jesus.

<sup>iii</sup> And the really amazing thing here, long term, is that these are not Jewish people honouring 'the King of the Jews.' The 'King of the Jews' is back in Jerusalem and he can't be bothered to make the two hour journey down to Bethlehem but these Gentiles (like us) have traveled halfway across the known world to honour the newborn King. That's worship. That's honouring Jesus for all He is worth.