

CHRISTMAS EVE 2017

“True Wisdom & the True King”

Matthew 2:1-12

Sunday, December 24, 2017 (Evening Service)

By David A. Ritchie

“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, 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.” When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 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.’ ” Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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.” 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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way” (Matthew 2:1–12, ESV).

Father God, who by the leading of a star revealed your only-begotten Son to the wise men: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may behold your glory face to face; we pray this through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you the Father and the Holy Spirit – one God – now and forever. Amen.¹

I. Introduction – A Tale of Two Kings and Two Kingdoms

Our Scripture reading this evening is *a tale of two kings*. One king is Herod. The other king is Jesus. And I believe the reason that wise men are wise is because they can discern who the *real* king is.

Herod is a subordinate king to Caesar of Rome (Mt. 2:1). History remembers Herod as Herod the Great, because he was rich, powerful, did lot of building projects, and was able to keep Palestine under control due to his fearsome ruthlessness. But in reality, Herod is a wicked man. He is paranoid. He is chronically insecure and obsessed with keeping his power. He even has several wives and sons

¹ The Episcopal Church, *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 162.

murdered.² As a megalomaniac, he wants so badly to be seen as the promised Messianic King that Israel had longed and hoped for. He even rebuilds and enlarges the Temple. But he is an imposter messiah, and deep down Herod knows this.

Now Herod has learned a new king has been born (Mt. 2:2). Men from the East have come to pay tribute to this new king and worship him. They don't consider Herod as an option to be this king. The wise men are asking not if there is a new king, they are asking where is the king. Herod is terrified that there is an heir of David (Mt 2:3).

For the original audience this story would have been undoubtedly heard as a politically charged challenge to the powers of this world. *Matthew is saying Jesus is King* and Herod is a usurper.³ Jesus will be the true king that the hearts of men have yearned for; he will be a shepherd for God's people. Herod is a tyrant who will use people to gain power and significance.

And despite what he says, Herod is not about to worship this new king. Herod wants power and significance, not salvation (Mt. 2:8). He calls a committee of religious scholars to find out where this would-be king is (Micah 5:2 says the messiah will be born in Bethlehem), and Herod then manipulates the wise men into telling him his age (Mt. 2:4-7). Later when Herod executes the toddlers of Bethlehem, we will see how far Herod will go to try to maintain power (Mt. 2:16). *Our self-worship is a deadly idol. When we try to build our own kingdom at all cost, and we make ourselves into our own messiah, we open the door to severe evil.*

But let us for a moment enter into this story, and place ourselves in the place of the wise men; not because we are wise, but because we too must discern between two kings and two different types of kingdoms. There is a kingdom where power and wealth are ultimate. And there is a kingdom where grace and love are ultimate. There is a kingdom where your purpose is to get all you can get. And there is a kingdom where your ultimate purpose is to give all you can give. There is a kingdom where you, your agenda, and your preferences are the center of your own universe. And there is a kingdom where a God who is love is the center of the universe. Your life will be based around one of these two kingdoms. Will you have the true wisdom to follow the true king? Which kingdom will you choose?

And how was it that a few men from a far away land were able to look into the sky and somehow see something the rest of the world missed?

II. The Text – The Truth Behind the Wise Men

To answer this question, I want to take a closer look at Matthew and see what we can learn about these wise men of the east. I want to ask three simple questions: **1.) Who are the Wise Men?, 2.) What Are They Looking For?, and 3.) Why Does it Matter?**

1. Who Are the Wise Men?

² C. Blomberg. *Vol. 22: Matthew*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 62.

³ N.T. Wright. *Matthew for Everyone: Part One*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 11.

There is an importance of the word Greek word for wise men (Mt. 2:1). It is the word “magi,” which includes the root from which we derive the English word “magic.” Why is this important? It means the notion of “three kings of the orient” is probably a wrong assumption. We assume there are three wise men because there are three gifts. We assume they are kings because of the costly wealth these gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh were unbelievably rare and expensive. But despite common perception, these are not holy men or Christian kings. They are *pagan magician-astrologers*.

Now the Jewish Philosopher Philo does mention a respected eastern school of Magi that seems like a school of natural philosophers or proto-scientists. There is even a possibility that this school was in ancient Babylon and was influenced by the leadership of the Jewish Prophet Daniel (Dan. 2:48).⁴ If this conjecture were true, it would explain why the Magi might be interested in a star foretelling the rise of a Jewish king.

2. What Are They Looking For?

The wise men seem to have surprising amount of data. They know (1.) that there has been a birth, (2.) that the one who is born is a king, (3.) that this king is somehow associated with the Jewish people, and (4.) that they need to worship him with everything they have. Somehow, some way, they were able to process data from the movement of stars that gave them this information, and ultimately led them to a personal encounter with Jesus (Mt. 2:9-10). This quasi-astrology seems nonsensical to our “enlightened,” Western minds, but the ancient world believed in a connection between heaven and earth.⁵ Some doubt such a story could even be true.

However, Professor Rick Larson of Texas A&M recently proposed a theory related to the movements of the planet Jupiter at around the time of Herod and the birth of Christ. He put together research on what he calls the *Bethlehem Star* wherein through astronomical mathematics he is able to show that in the year 3 B.C. Jupiter (the King Planet) ran into a triple conjunction with Regulas (the King Star) inside of the constellation Leo the Lion (which is associated with the tribe of Judah) at the time of Rosh Hashana (which is the Jewish New Year) before traveling into the constellation Virgo (the Virgin).⁶

This would have been a pretty extraordinary astronomical event. This may or may not have been the event the wise men of the East saw, but it is fascinating research and is probably the most persuasive argument as to why these men thought that their was a great King born to the Jews.

After visiting and worshipping Jesus, the wise men are warned by God in a dream about Herod’s wickedness and they are obedient to leave for their own country without passing through Jerusalem (2:11-12). It is good that they never returned to Herod, because the news of Jesus’ arrival sends this imposter king into a murderous rage.

3. Why Does it Matter?

⁴ Larson, Rick. *The Bethlehem Star: Unlock the Mystery of the World’s Most Famous Star*. Directed by Stephen Vidano. Spokane. MPower Distribution, 2009.

⁵ Wright, 10.

⁶ Larson.

The reason why this is fascinating is because these wise men were spiritually hungry seekers who were able to look to the stars and see something that the priests of Israel had totally missed. The heavens were proclaiming the glory of God, and the sky was displaying his handiwork (Ps. 19:1). The very stars had announced the advent of the King of heaven. Yet, the religious had missed it. God often chooses to reveal himself to pagans, at times even in the midst of their pagan religious practices, to lead them on to the full truth found only in Christ.⁷ This introduces a theme that will become a major theme not only of Matthew but also of the whole New Testament—the theme of the gentile inclusion into God’s people. The Magi worshipping Jesus shows that the reign of this new king will extend beyond that of the Jewish people, indeed Matthew’s gospel ends with a command to preach this gospel to all nations. At the end of Matthew it is another Gentile—a Roman soldier watching the death of Jesus on Calvary—proclaims that this was the Son of God (Mt. 27:54).⁸

In fact the book of Revelation ends with a picture of the New Jerusalem, where King Jesus reigns on a redeemed heaven and earth. In this new kingdom, there is no racial inequity or division. All the nations of the world bring their glory to Jesus in worship (Rev. 21:26). The wise men are led to Jesus, not because they deserve Jesus, not because they have are super smart or really nice. They are led to Jesus because God is a God of grace. He reaches into our foolishness and our world of self-worship and he invites us into union with himself. This is hope for us all. The gospel is an invitation for us all to find the hope of the true king Jesus!

I am grateful for this, because there was a time in my life when I was an agnostic. I was definitely a spiritual seeker, but I was a pagan and my life was in open rebellion to God. I was my own little Herod, trying to rule my own little kingdom. Essentially I believed that the only way I could know anything was through my own experience and reason. Because I believed this I thought there was no way I could ever know God, or even if there was a God. My thinking was that if there was a God, he was so beyond our understanding it was impossible to know him, and it might even be impossible for him to know us. What I could have never imagined, and what probably the wise men could never have imagined, is that God has the right to reveal himself. At nineteen, I was beginning to go to church, meet Christian friends, and even started reading the Bible. Then, one night in my college dormitory, as I was reading the book of Romans, I met God. The Holy Spirit opened my heart, and revealed himself to me. I didn’t come to know God because I had reasoned it out or found enough scientific evidence to prove his existence. I came to know God because he gracious condescended to my level and made himself known to me. I came to know God, because I came to know Jesus!

III. Conclusion

Again, place yourself in the place of the wise men. Do you have the true wisdom to see the true king? He has made himself known and is making himself known, and he calls us to worship today!

Today is a day to celebrate that God is not a distant God. He is a good who breaks into our reality. When we could have never been smart enough or good enough to come to him he has come to us in humility and love. He has stepped off of his throne of glory, and folded his eternal nature into the womb of a woman and was born in a humble manger.

⁷ Blomberg, 66.

⁸ Wright,.

Yet behind this manger of Christmas looms the shadow of the cross.

We see that dark shadow even in the gifts that the wise men bring. One gift is gold, which represents that this child is destined for kingship and honor. One gift is frankincense, which represents that this child is destined to be the true and better priest that mediates God's presence to men. But the last gift is myrrh. Myrrh is a precious oil, but one that is used for burial. As the Christmas Carol sings: Myrrh is "a bitter perfume, breaths a life of gathering gloom. Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb."

This is a child born to die.

The true king will not come to where a crown of gold, but rather a crown of thorns. The reason Christ came to this earth was to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died. The light of the world came into the world and for a brief moment his life was extinguished.

But that is not the end of the story! On the third day after Jesus died upon the cross, he rose again unto newness of life and has victoriously overcome sin, Satan, death. He has confronted our sorrows and suffering, allowed them to do their very worst to him, so that he might bring their reign to an end!

The light of the true King has dawned. This King who came will come again. The true light of his kingdom is already shining. And this is what we remember by the lighting of candles on Christmas Eve. We remember that light has shone in our darkness; the manger is now empty and so is the grave!

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it! *AMEN.*