

Magi From the East

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. This is a reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 2, verse 1 to 12.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?

We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, For this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah.

[1 : 17] For out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where their child was.

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. This is the gospel of the Lord. We praise you, Lord Christ.

Amen. Amen. All right. Again, good morning, everybody. Merry Christmas. What a joyous occasion to gather here this morning, whether you're online or sitting here, to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ with you.

[2 : 29] It's really awesome. So I'm really glad to be here with everyone. I'm going to jump right into the text because I know that the kids are probably antsy to get home and, you know, go on with Christmas.

And this text is very familiar to us, so I kind of want to approach it in a different way, as you guys would see it play out in the nativity play. Every year, we introduce to children the meaning behind Christmas and, as adults, to be reminded of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us through the story of the three wise men or the magi.

And this part of the nativity play is colored with drama, and I want to follow the story. That's what I want to do as we approach the text. I want to follow the story and ask questions along the way because if we follow the story, eventually we will lead to Jesus.

And when we receive Jesus as the gift, our only proper response is joyful worship. And that is my golden thread today. When we receive Jesus as the gift, our only proper response is joyful worship. So, here we go. The story can be organized into two parts, verse 1 to verse 8, when the magi arrives on the scene and enters into Jerusalem and meets King Herod.

[3 : 48] That's part 1. Part 2 is when the magi leaves Jerusalem and goes to Bethlehem and meets Jesus. So, you can kind of think about this nativity play in two scenes.

The first one goes from verse 1 to 8 and then second to 9 to 12. So, I want to start with part 1. The first characters who arrive on the scene in Jerusalem are magis.

Who are the magis? They are from the east, modern-day Iran. They were Persians, and they were priests of the Zoroastrian. It's one of the world's oldest organized religion.

They believe in a good God and an evil God, and they predict that the good will eventually win over the evil. They wore long robes and conical hats, and they sought divine guidance from the elements and the stars.

They were off, but in their hearts, they were seeking God. So, God used them, these Gentile priests, in the story that would change history forever. Little did these magi know they would start a multi-billion consumer industry.

[4 : 51] 20% of all your spending happens during Christmas. So, if you need to blame somebody for spending so much money on gifts, you can blame magi. They started it.

But when the magi arrived on the scene, they were confused. They had followed a star all the way from Persia to Jerusalem to seek out this king of the Jews. But when they arrived, they found the opposite.

They were the ones bearing the news of this new king was born. They were the ones coming into the cities of Jerusalem and asking people, where is this king?

And the crowd, the invisible crowd, responded with commotion. Local gossip got so loud that Herod, sitting in his high places in the palace, heard of this.

When he heard, he was disturbed. Verse 3 tells us this. The Greek word for this actually carries a physical reaction from fear.

[5 : 53] You can think of it as Herod was thrown into confusion. He was agitated. And fear showed up, so much so that he had to reach out to the magi at the end of his scene and have a private consultation with him.

And so was all of Jerusalem with him, according to verse 3. I was a little thrown off by this. I mean, I couldn't understand why Herod was nervous, but I was like, why were the Jews in Jerusalem also nervous and agitated because of this reaction of Herod?

So we need to look at Herod as a person first. Herod the Great was a giant of his time, and the legacy he left behind were giant footprints. He was half Jewish, and he was an heir of the biggest spice trade merchant of the time.

His mother was a Nabataean princess. So a lot of scholars have looked into Herod and did studies on him, and they said that he was probably the wealthiest man who has ever walked the earth, even before he became a regional king.

Now, if that still stands true, I don't know, but one of the most famous architecture from Herod is the Herodian. And this is an example of who he is as a king. Herod wanted a palace on top of a hill, but there was no hill, so he made a hill and built a palace on top of it.

[7 : 11] That was the kind of ruler he was. But despite all of this, it did not lead him to security, peace, love, or joy. Instead, Herod the Great was an extremely anxious and paranoid man.

He was so afraid that someone would come and challenge his throne and authority that he killed everyone that he was threatened by, including his wives and sons. So bearing this in mind, verse 3 starts to make a little bit more sense because when Herod was stressed out, his people were also stressed out.

The state of a kingdom is determined by the king who rules it. So if this king is anxious, of course his people will be anxious. It's like a company's culture is set by the CEO.

The mood temperature of the classroom is set by the teacher. The mood temperature of the classroom is set by the teacher. Because Herod was a paranoid and an anxious man who was emotionally driven without mercy, people who lived in his kingdom were also scared and worried. Who knows what he might do? All of Jerusalem was aware that Herod was a merciless king, so they were distressed because they were like sheep without a shepherd. They had a shepherd who only cared about his gain and his benefits.

[8 : 28] They have a king who has an empire mindset instead of a shalom mindset. And so when the king is happy, they're happy, but when the king is distressed, they are also distressed.

A lesson that we can learn from this is the significance of presence. Our presence in this world matters, and we need to take responsibility for it. This can be applied in the workplace.

No matter what title you hold at work, we all exert some kind of influence and change the dynamic in the places we go into. This is equally true for students who are sitting here today.

That's why they are class clowns, people who use their influence to change the mood of the classroom. But I want to bring it even further back to the basics because work is not fundamentally where we are shaped.

It's in our family units where we are shaped. Because no matter what kind of job you hold, when you leave work, when you leave school, you are a father, you are a mother, a son or daughter, a brother or sister to somebody.

[9 : 29] It's with our family that we begin to form and shape and learn how to steward our presence and our role in this world. Recently, there have been many occasions where I had to call out my six-year-old nephew for being impatient and rude to his younger sister.

It's not so much about what he says. It's about how he says it and the tone that he says it in that reflects his attitude towards her. He's six right now, so he has no choice but to stop and listen to me.

But one day, he will be a teenager and he will no longer want to sit there and listen to me. And hopefully by then, he would learn how to steward his presence in this world because I took the time and the hard, it was a hard conversation, even though he's six, to teach him how to be respectful to others, to teach him how to practice self-control out of respect for another person who is also made in the image of God.

Because if no one teaches him that it is not okay to scream shut up to another human being, how would he ever know it is not okay? These conversations get harder and harder as you get older. It's a lot more nuanced and takes more intentionality. But if you get better at it by practicing, it will make all the difference. It might be awkward and hard to sit through at first, but it is a muscle to speak in truth and in love that we need to use, to be gentle in our choices of words, to give them appropriate time and space to respond, to let go when your job is finished in this conversation and stop pestering.

[11 : 04] These are all things that we need to practice, and if you don't even try, you will never know how to exercise this presence and this authority that God has given you.

It's not about policing people's behavior around you. It's to remind ourselves that we are supposed to embody Jesus in the world. He is light. He is love.

He is power. He is truth. He is authority. He is meek. He is gentle. God has given me the authority and influence over my six-year-old nephew as his aunt. I'm stewarding it by stepping into this role and teaching him how to be respectful and to practice self-control.

Because even at age six, he already knows how to exert power and authority over his younger sister. even at age six. So, how does your presence affect the spaces you go into and why?

When people are around you, can they witness the fruit of the Spirit in you or smell the aroma of Christ and holiness and purity? Herod's presence in this world was motivated by his fear of losing control, fear of change, fear of his life, fear for not being the greatest.

[12 : 13] So, everything he did was a reaction to this fear. Thus, in response to the message of the Magi, where is he who has been born the King of Jews? We find a people who are fearful, distressed, confused, and faithless.

That's part one. Now, part two, we shift to Bethlehem. This is from verse nine to verse 12. And in this scene, we find divine intervention, guidance, because the star that led the Magi into Jerusalem had disappeared for a while.

But once the Magi got back on course and went their way to find Jesus to offer him gifts, the star came back up. God was with them. And there, they found Jesus, not in a manger, but in a house with his family.

Although Joseph wasn't mentioned, we can assume he was there. I think what Matthew was trying to do was to set up a place where it is warm, safe, and intimate.

Bethlehem, the house of bread, belongs in the countryside of Israel. So when a Jewish person thinks about Bethlehem, they think about barley fields, gold, warm, like the scene in Ruth.

[13 : 27] Contrasting the city of Jerusalem, where you would enter through cold, tall city walls, and inside we find marketplace, politicians, Roman soldiers standing guard, a very impersonal, chaotic, and loud place.

It was a safe and quiet place where we find Jesus away from the chaos of this world. And we find our Savior as a baby in his mother's embrace under his father's roof, protected.

I think Matthew does a masterful job teaching us what the house of God should look like. Unlike the first scene, this one is marked by peace, quietness, love, safety, and joy.

It is in a place like this that the Magi encounters God. And I wonder if this is a general rule of thumb for our spiritual lives as well. I'm not saying that God doesn't exist in the marketplace or could care less about our government.

God rules over that too. He is omnipresent, and the whole world is his. So he can use whatever circumstance you are in to teach you something or to put a thought in you to stir you up like he did with the crowd in Jerusalem.

[14:33] What I am saying is in order to receive him as a gift, to know him as your Savior from your biggest fears and insecurities, to invite him in to heal you of your deepest pain, it happens in safe and quiet places where you can respond freely as you are without the demands of this world, without the pressure from yourself within to be somebody else.

It's in the stillness and quietness where you are just you. You are just you, a beloved child of God. You are just you whom God loves so much.

It's in the stillness and quiet with God that he tells you that and affirms you of that, but it doesn't come without effort. It takes pursuing and following God in unexpected ways to unexpected places like the Magi's.

That is where all of our faith journey started though, wasn't it? Before we professed our faith to the church, before we got baptized, God confronting us of our sins and opening our eyes to see how we need him, it was in an intimate surrendering to Jesus.

After wrestling with the implications of this decision to surrender to him, all which happened within the inner chambers of our heart. It was in a still and quiet place where your faith begun.

[15:57] This stillness and quietness needs to continue in order for our Christian lives to deepen in Christ. A lot of times Christians plateau for this reason. They stop receiving God's gift for them.

The gift is always there because God is impartial and he gives to all of his children and he is infinite. But in order for us to enjoy the gift, we have to receive it, we have to open it, and we have to use it. Here's an example of what I mean. If you're at least two decades old, you can probably relate when I say nothing triggers you more than your parents or family members, especially during the holiday season when it's in your face and there's nowhere to run.

Broken parent-child relationship is nothing new. It started way back with Noah and Ham in Genesis. I mean, that's what God came to redeem us for. But some of the most hurtful and damaging experiences are from our parents because they are the first people we learn how to be in relationships with.

I'm not here to blame any parents or to pin responsibility on anyone. Most of our parents have given their best and they have done what was right. But as adults, we need to take responsibility for the choices we make.

[17:11] And this doesn't take away from the pain they have caused you by rejecting you, silencing you, or neglecting you. Forgiving someone who have hurt you over and over again when they were supposed to be your world and protecting you seems impossible at times.

How do you forgive when you don't even know how deep the wound is or how far it will affect you?

It's in times like this when I think Matthew provides direction. Because if you want to forgive, you have to first receive forgiveness because we can't give what we don't have.

But we can have it because after all, that is what he endured on the cross for us. It's so that we can say it is possible to do this impossible job of forgiveness.

It is possible to let go and forgive because he has done it. It is possible for us to heal and recover from generational trauma and choose differently for ourselves because that's what Jesus made possible for me when he said, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.

It is possible to forgive someone who has repeatedly hurt you because that's what Jesus is doing for us. Even now, Jesus didn't just forgive me or you on the day we became Christians.

[18:22] He forgives us every single day. He forgives us every single day and his mercy is new every morning for all of my life. He is always giving me a second chance, a new chance to choose differently, to embody his forgiveness to the world.

I can forgive because he has forgiven me, but I must receive this gift of forgiveness. I must first understand and know that at the core of who I am, I am a sinner saved by grace through faith.

This doesn't happen when you rely on worldly values or visions and secular therapy to change. They are helpful for a time, but it's hollow unless you ground it in the person of Christ because for Christians, forgiveness is not hollow.

Forgiveness is a person. Forgiveness is a gift from God and it cost them everything. It wasn't without a price and he gave all of himself so that we can be reconciled to God and say, I am yours and you are mine.

He was broken so that we may be made whole. So if your life is still marked with brokenness and broken patterns, then maybe you've forgotten to open the gift that is just sitting there from God.

[19 : 34] If your life is still marked by complaining instead of thankfulness and joy, maybe you need to open your gift. Let's all work on being better receivers of God's gift. Learn to cultivate quietness and stillness to receive God in a fresh way every day.

Because when we receive the gift of God, our only proper response is joyful worship. And here is my conclusion. When I was reading the Greek of this passage, I had to do a double take on verse 10 because literally the Greek says, the Greek says, now when they saw the star above the house, they rejoiced with a very mega joy.

That's a lot of joy in a moment and you can't help but smile because that's the magic of Christmas. There is so much joy everywhere. Now that joy might trigger some of us and it might be packaged in such a way that it's a little shallow, but the joy can't be denied and it brings people together.

It gives us an excuse to show love in a different way and that's why we love Christmas. But I think something very valuable that the Magi is teaching us here is, if the Magi responded to King Jesus with joy and worship and treasures to bless his family, how much more do we respond to Jesus as his children?

Joyful worship of the heart is an act of offering what is best of you to God. Imagine when the Magi opened their treasure boxes and all of a sudden, the light hits the gold and starts to reflect and glisten.

[21 : 08] When the box opens, the smell of frankincense and myrrh, the Magi gave Jesus and his family treasures because Jesus is expensive. Jesus is precious. He's royal and he's absolutely worthy.

They worshiped in a very mega joy because Jesus is awesome. And in this season of giving and for the new year to come, may I encourage you to think about how you can offer your best to God.

And here is an illustration. So this is a card that I received from the same nephew. This is a card that I got from him. And I think this is the first time he had made me a card.

And inside he drew a dolphin. And I brought this because it means a lot to me. As a boy, this was his best gift to his aunt. He's not earning any money. He doesn't have any possessions.

And so this is the best gift that he could offer me. And I will never look at this gift and say it is not enough. I will never look at this and say, oh no, I want something else.

[22 : 07] No, I treasure this because it tells me that he loves me. And it tells me he even drew my favorite animal. Like he knew it would make me happy.

He gave me a gift because he wanted to make me happy because he loves me. And this is how God feels about our gifts to him. God is not asking you to give beyond what you have earned or can offer.

He is asking you to give him your heart. He is asking you to give him your love, the best of yourself. God wants you. So what is the next step you can take to give God your best worship, your joyful worship?

Maybe you don't have a Bible reading plan right now. Maybe the next step is to follow the Bible verse, the daily Bible verse on the Bible app. Maybe you don't have a consistent schedule because you're leaving at the end of the day.

Adjusting that would really help. Maybe you don't have time to pause and think, okay, what about driving to work? That's a good time to pause and listen to sermons and reflect on your day and invite God into that space.

[23 : 13] There are so many ways to go about it. What really matters is you want to do it. You want to do this for God because you want to make him happy. Because you know that you have received a gift from God that changed your entire life.

So make a solid step forward in this new year because Christmas might pass but our act of worship is a lifestyle. It is always and it continues beyond Christmas.

God smiles upon his children and he wants you to take the next step. Commit to it. Give him a gift because you want to make him happy. And finally, I want to say this.

You have received his gift and you know how it changed everything about your life. When I got baptized, my mom gave me a Bible and inside the Bible it says, which means when you have God, you have everything.

So, let us come and receive the gift of God who is Jesus Christ so we can go out and be a gift to this world and ask his disciples. Amen.

[24 : 16] Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father, thank you for being with us right now here as we bring our best worship to you, Lord.

Thank you for giving us your son, your everything so that we can be yours and you can be ours.

Thank you for this family that we get to have in you.

How amazing it is that we're family here, Lord. All of us are connected because of you and Lord, we are just overjoyed because it's so different from everything else in this world and Lord, I pray that we would see this as a precious gift from you and we would steward it well and in stewarding well we would bring our worship to you, Lord, even after Christmas.

Lord, be with us. We love you. In Jesus' precious name I pray. Amen.