

Of Kings and Wise Men

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[0:00] Good morning. There are a lot of greetings this morning. Merry Christmas. We say Merry Christmas! We say Merry Christmas because Christmas isn't over. Christmas lasts 12 days and we're still in the season of Christmas. So Merry Christmas to you all. And Happy New Year as well. It is wonderful to have you worship with us, especially if you are visiting or this is your first time with us.

My name is Ephio Jatario. I am the pastor here at Church of the Holy Trinity. And we are happy to have you worship with us on this first Sunday of the new year. And we are going to be this morning in Matthew's account in Matthew chapter 2, his account of the visit of the wise men.

It is on page 960 of your pew Bible. I encourage you to open along so you can follow along.

Now, it's interesting that in our imagination, the story of the wise men visiting Jesus is always placed right there in the manger with the shepherds and the camel and the donkey and the sheep. Now, it is right that we do so. We conflate them. But in the Gospels, those two stories are different. I don't know if you know that.

[1:40] And we will talk about that. So there is a lot of wrong views about the visit of the Magi. We even sing, even in our song today, we place them together. Now, it's not altogether wrong, but it's important to notice in the Gospels that they are quite different.

And there is actually a time separate. The visit of the Magi is separate from the events that we read about on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, when they told them of the birth of the new king, the Messiah of God.

But it's no less significant what is going on here and what Matthew is doing by including this story in his account of the king, Jesus.

There are some wrong views, though. We were told that these Magi came from the east. Now, likely they are from the region of modern-day Iraq or Iran or Yemen.

So quite far east for that time. They've traveled long distances, probably months, to get to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem.

[2:50] They are from the east. Magi comes from the Greek word Magos, which comes from the Persian word Magopati. Magi. This was probably a title. And it's a title, actually, given to priests in the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism.

You know that's still a present religion in our day. It's an ancient religion, and it's a title given to priests. So these three, in fact, they're not actually three. We're not sure that there are three of them.

There might have been five of them. There might have been 50 of them, for all we know. The Bible doesn't tell us how many of them there were. But they were likely, they were not kings either.

We always, you know, we have this carol, The Three Kings. Likely they were not kings, but they were important men. They were likely very rich and wealthy men with high status, noble status, in their country and the realm they came from.

They were part of the nobility class. More appropriate, it is more appropriate to think of them as wise men rather than kings. They were wise men because they were, as I said before, they were priests.

[4:06] But in fact, they were probably people that we would think of as astrologers. Astrologers or astronomers in those days. There's no distinction in ancient time between astrologers and astronomers.

Astrologers and they were people who studied the stars to see the time and the season and the signs. We know that they are Gentiles. They're not Jewish.

They're not of the Jewish nation. But they had been watching and looking for a sign. We'll talk more about that. Why was it that they were even looking in the first place?

But our nativity scene, which places them with the shepherds, we've just said it's likely wrong.

Because we see there in verse 11 that when they did appear on the scene, they were not there in the stable, in the manger.

Verse 11, Matthew tells us that they came to Jesus in the house with his parents. So it's likely that Jesus at this point is a toddler. No longer a newborn.

[5:08] The Greek word that Matthew uses there is *paideon*, which means a child under learning, which is a word used for a child between the age of 1 and 7.

So Jesus is likely between the age of 1 and 2 at this point. A toddler learning to walk. This is the visitor they got. And we see here that Mary and Joseph were still in Bethlehem.

So, why come all this way to Jesus? Why seek the king of the Jews when they themselves were Gentiles? It doesn't seem to be their king after all.

They have their king. They're from probably the Parthian Empire. They're not even part of the Roman Empire. They came long distances to seek out this king. In chapter 1, as Matthew compels the genealogy of Jesus, he keeps referring, at least three times he referred there in chapter 1 of Matthew, to the deportation or exile to Babylon.

He's referring there, as he tells about the genealogy, about the long exile of the people of Israel, Judah, in Babylon, under the Persian Empire. This meant that Jews, for those decades while they were in exile, would have been part of the empire.

[6:33] And we know they were part of the empire. They were, in fact, probably some Jews served as Magi, wise men. Under the Persian kings and the Babylonian kings. We know, in fact, that Daniel was chief of the wise men in Babylon.

Remember, just quickly, remember your Old Testament. He was appointed as chief of Nebuchadnezzar's wise men. And even under the Persian rulers, he was appointed as chief of the wise men under these rulers.

So it's likely that Daniel spoke to these wise men who were under him of the promise of the long-expected king, the Messiah of God, who would come from the line of David.

It's likely. Why would they be looking? It's because they've heard of this king who was to be born.

They've heard that this king, his kingdom will be from everlasting to everlasting.

They've heard from Daniel. They've probably read Daniel as he puts it down in Daniel 7. that all knees will bow in subjection to this king.

[7:49] And his kingdom will have no... All other kingdoms and all other kings will be subject to him. So you can imagine that for generations, since the time of Daniel, hundreds of years, some of these wise men have waited and passed on the news to their children and children's children, looking for the sign of the king who is the Messiah of God, longing for the coming of the Messiah, along with other faithful people who wait for the coming of God's king.

The only thing the faithful had in common, there were many people who were longing and waiting. We see that in Matthew's account and in Luke's account. Different kinds of people longing and waiting for the coming of this king.

The only thing the faithful expectant waiters had in common was that the object of their hope, the object of their long expectation is the same person, Jesus Christ.

We know of Anna who waited, of Simeon who waited long years for the redemption of Israel. We now hear in this account of these important men from the east who had been waiting for generations faithfully for God's promise to come to pass.

They were wise men, but they were wise, they're really wise men, because they waited, longing for their expectant Messiah. They were all wise men and women.

[9:26] The true wisdom they possess is measured by the fact that they fixed their eyes, their hearts, and their hopes on the word of God.

The word of God and the promise of God to send a savior, his rescuer, into the world. This is what made them truly wise. They had nothing in common.

These wise men had nothing in common with Simeon, the old man who was about to die, or with Anna, the old widow. They didn't know each other even. But they were all wise men and women, because they held on to God's word.

They read God's word. They meditated on God's word. They fixed their eyes on God's promises. And God's promises is what directs and ordered their lives, and their days, and their weeks, and their months.

Not the circumstances of the world around them. Their hope was tied to God's sure words in his holy scriptures. Not to the affairs of men that is passing away.

[10 : 34] This is what made them truly wise, I think. And we can be wise like them if we would fix our eyes and our hopes and our expectations and our longing based on the word of God.

On the Messiah of God. The King. Remember, this is a refrain that we've been saying since Advent. We are people who live between the two Advents.

We're not unlike these people who longed for the return of the King. We ourselves are longing in our day, in our age, for the King to return.

But are we fixed our eyes on the promise of God? Are we looking around at things that are passing away? So this story, that Matthew has for us, is the story of kings and of wise men.

What of kings? This is a story of the birth of a king, of the promise of a king. Wise men looking for the king. These wise men from the East longed for the promised Messiah.

[11 : 41] desire. And you see what God is doing? A God in His kindness always meets us when we longed and looked and searched for Him. He's done so now with these men.

God in His kindness sent to them a sign to lead them to His King, to His leader. But in their world, there were many pretenders who saw themselves as sovereign.

Many who demanded the worship and devotion of other men in those days. And it's not like our days as well. There are many today who demand a filthy, a worship.

Sometimes it's us ourselves. We would rather worship ourselves. Now these men coming from the Parthian Empire, they came into another empire where there was a sovereign.

There was a Roman Emperor. And this Roman Emperor was so powerful, vast. He would have been referred to as King of Kings.

[12 : 49] And he had vassals who ruled in different realms under his empire where these men traveled. They came to one of his vassals of the Roman Empire.

This vassal king named Herod. This Edomite man known as Herod the Great. He was in fact a minor ruler of a little region of Judea in the Roman Empire.

He was put in power by Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, to rule this region in Caesar's name. He was, however, though he was a vassal king, he was a very rich, wealthy man.

He did do great things. He was the one that built the temple. It was actually the temple that Jesus worshipped at in his day. It was Herod's temple. It was a magnificent thing to behold.

the temple that Herod built. But he was also a cruel man. He killed his own wife because he was threatened by her.

[14 : 07] He killed two of his own sons towards the end of his reign because he was threatened by them. He was a man who was paranoid, who was holding on firmly, tightly to the power that he had.

In fact, at his death, he commanded that many of his advisors would be killed alongside him after his death so that there would be many people to mourn his death. Such was the depravity and wickedness and cruelty of this Herod.

But he was king. Vassal king though he was, he was king and ruler. And Jesus was born towards the end of this, the reign of this Herod.

Now, as we just said, Herod had gone paranoid. He's doing all things to protect his kingdom and power. Such was the length that he went to, that he killed his own family members to do that.

But here comes these wise men coming to Jerusalem. you might forgive them for doing so. They know that a king had been born. Where else will you go when a king is born?

[15 : 19] Then to the capital city of a kingdom. Where else will you inquire about the birth of a king? That in the palace, where is this person who was born who was king of the Jews?

They inquired. And Herod gathered all his, do you see there, even at the birth of the king, of, of, of, at the news of his birth, what happens in Jerusalem?

We're told that Herod was troubled, all Jerusalem with him. I wonder why all Jerusalem was troubled with him.

I think I know why. It's because Herod, paranoid king, troubled, feels threatened, everybody else feels threatened after a while. He's killed his own wife at this point.

Likely one of his sons has already been killed by him. So they're troubled at this news. What news do you bring these wise men of a rival king? And what does he do?

[16 : 26] He assembled, look there in verse 4, he assembled all the chief priests and all the scribes of the people. people. So Herod assembles the wise men in his kingdom, in Israel.

He assembled them together and he inquires. But the good news of the king's burden, I think it brought different responses from different people.

I want us to see that as well. Here in God's word is the news that God's king, God's leader has arrived on the scene. That God's plan, that these people have been faithfully longing for, has foretold, has come to pass.

God's word is the sure and trustworthy guide for our lives. Because it is the account of God's plan and God's purposes for the world he created.

So as we long and we look for the signs of the time, where are we looking at? Where should we look at? Other than God's word. But oftentimes I think we do it backwardly.

[17 : 40] When we look in God's word, we look at it to mine from it little trinkets for our own lives. That's not a bad thing to do. But I think we do it backwards.

When we come to God's word, we must first look at it to see what God's word says about his plan and his purposes for his glory, not ours.

So when you come to God's word, are you looking at it to see God's plan and purposes being fulfilled in history and in time? And only then, only after you've done that, do you now find your place in God's story.

And so these wise men come, they've done that, they're truly wise, they're not looking mostly about themselves, they're looking for God's purposes as it's being fulfilled in the world.

And what do these wise men, the truly wise, and the chief priests and the scribes, the wise men of Herod? What do they come to? They saw there in God's word, the promise of God's king, 700 years before he was born, from the mouth of the prophet Micah, 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.

[19 : 12] There is God's word, there is God's plan, proclaimed and prophesied 700 years before, coming to pass. And so they tell Herod, the place where the king, who is from the line of David, is to be born, is in the town of the king, the city of the king, Bethlehem, the house of bread.

The bread of life will be born in the house of bread. God wants us to see along with this wise man, to see that his appointed king for the world has been spoken of.

His destiny, the destiny of this king, is to be the great shepherd of God's people. You see that he is the ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.

Israel. It was to this that the wise man searched and looked for eagerly. And I think I am encouraging us this morning, in this first day of the new year, to be like these wise men.

I commend them to us. To look with full anticipation, with full hope and trust in the word of God, expecting his promises.

[20 : 30] promises. Dependent on his promises to be fulfilled. To think of our lives in this way, to think of our lives as dependent on God's word, is a source of freedom for us, and joy.

It is for the wise men. Look what happened when they came, finally, to the house where the king, the king, the toddler king is.

Look at the words that Matthew uses there in verse 10. They saw the star on that house. They know they've come to the place where they've long traveled towards. They've gotten to their destination. Matthew says they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. That's a bunch of superlatives in the Greek. Great joy with joy exceedingly. They rejoiced because they've come to meet the king.

But what's going on elsewhere? There is turbulence and distress. What does Eretz say he will do to this wise man?

[21 : 41] He was right to say, go search diligently, in verse 8, for the child. When you have found him, bring me where I too may come and worship him. He was right to say that, but his heart and his intent, obviously, was not to really come and worship this king.

But that's what he ought to have done. That's what all the chief priests and the wise men, the wise men, the scribes of Israel, should have done as well. They should have accompanied these men from the east to come and worship.

What is it to worship? The word there means to bow down, to kiss the earth towards the king. It's an ancient word. It is to put yourself at the mercy of one who is infinitely more superior to you, sovereign over you, to bow down.

That's what these important men come into this humble home to meet this young family. Can you imagine the scene?

Toddler Jesus, barely learning to walk. You see these men, they might have been three, five, or 50, come in and they lay themselves at the feet of God, of God's king, of the Messiah.

[23:05] There is Aaron's response and there is the wise man's response. There is the response of the rebellious and the response of the faithful. What is your response?

this is God's king. This is God's leader. Is he also your leader and your king? Will you come to him, worshipping, prostrating yourself before him?

Are you clinging to different powers like Aaron? Aaron is not unique in this regard. The chief priest later will do the same thing.

they will try to kill God's king and God's Messiah. Aaron did try. If you read further in this chapter, Aaron knowing that this child would have been a boy of two or younger, sends his henchmen into the town of Bethlehem to murder all the toddler boys under the age of two.

So that he can get rid of God's king. Such cruelty. Such evil. But that evil still persists in the heart of men and women in our day.

[24:29] They might not have the power and the means to do what Herod does, but they do so in their hearts every day. They want to kill God's king and God's ruler.

The question here is for you as well. Where is your heart? May I encourage you to come to this king, bowing before him, worshipping him.

May I commend to you the wise men's response. And may I finally commend to you the king himself. He is worthy of your worship.

He is worthy of your trust. king. This king comes to redeem and to save and to rescue. This king is the king that comes not to rule in the way of Herod and Caesars, but to lay down his life as a great shepherd of the sheep.

That is the means by which he delivers and ransoms you. This is a poem by T.S. Eliot. T.S. Eliot is a famous writer. And he became an Anglican towards the end of his life.

[25:43] And he wrote this. This is the last stanza of this poem that he wrote about the journey of the Magi. And I'll read it to you and then we'll pray. From the point of view of the Magi, one of the Magi's themselves, speaking of their journey, all this was a long time ago, I remember, remembering the journey.

And I will do it again, but set down. This set down. This. We were led all that way. For birth or death?

There was a birth, certainly. We had evidence and no doubt of that birth. I had seen birth and death, but I thought they were different.

This birth was hard and bitter agony for us. Like death, our death. We returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here in the old dispensation with an alien people clutching their guards.

I should be glad of another death. God said, he knows, the Magi knew, as evidenced by their gifts to this king, that this king came not to rule like other kings, but to give himself for his subjects.

[27:14] He comes to die. This birth leads to the, this birth and this king leads to the agony of the cross. this is the kind of king that is worthy of your worship.

He frees you as a subject to live in freedom. Will you come to him this morning? Will you trust him this year?

Will you depend on his word? Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us pray. Let us