

Matthew 2:1-12

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[0 : 00] Would you turn with me in a Bible to Matthew chapter 2? We are looking at Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 through 12 this morning. It's the story of the wise men, as it's traditionally known.

If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, page 807 is where you'll find it, Matthew 2, starting at verse 1. 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.

[1 : 24] 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 worshipped 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.

Many people are preparing to travel long distances this time of year. Perhaps you are looking forward to finishing the semester and heading home to visit family.

Or perhaps you're staying here and looking forward to friends or family visiting you. Or maybe you're just not going anywhere at all, and nobody's visiting you, and it's simpler that way.

[2 : 33] Now let me ask, what motivates people to embark on long, difficult, or even dangerous journeys? Sometimes it's a desire to be reunited with long-lost friends or family members.

Sometimes it's curiosity to be a world traveler, bring back memories and photographs and souvenirs and all kinds of interesting things. Sometimes it's for the sake of expanding a business, attending a conference, or for training or networking.

Well, in this morning's passage, we see a group of people, the wise men, or the Greek word is the magi, sometimes known as the magi, they embark on a long, difficult, dangerous journey.

Now we're not certain where they came from. They might have been from Persia. There was lots of interest in astrology and stars in Persia, or from Babylon perhaps, or perhaps from southern Arabia.

But either way, from any one of those three locations, they would have had to travel a thousand miles or more to get to Jerusalem. Now even if they were riding on camels, going 30 miles a day, which is about the fastest you could go, the journey would have taken at least a month each way, without any of the modern traveling comforts that we take for granted, without any reliable police force to protect them from robbers on the road, without any call boxes or cell phones in case of emergency.

[4 : 00] And the purpose of their journey is to see a little kid who is not related to them by blood, who is not from their ethnic group or their nation, who is probably too young to speak a word to them.

Now, babies are cute, but you know what? Now, they all look about the same. Okay, parents, right? Your own child is obviously the cutest in the world, right?

I mean, with that exception, you know, I don't know, they're all pretty cool, but you wouldn't travel a thousand miles for a whole month just to see an unusual baby.

And then when they arrive, they bow down before him, unload their most valuable possessions, and return home empty-handed. See, if you read this story, you might be asking yourself, why in the world would they go all the way in order to do that?

Well, according to the story, the child whom they seek is destined to be a king, the king of the Jews, as they say in verse 2. But still, that raises a question. Why would the elite members of Persian or Babylonian or Arabian society care to visit the future king of Judea?

[5 : 18] It would be like President Obama sending a delegation of his cabinet advisors to go on pilgrimage to Swaziland. There's a small country in southern Africa that still has a hereditary monarchy to bring lavish gifts to the heir to the throne and to declare their undying loyalty to him.

It just wouldn't make sense. Judea was a small province. These were the elite members of more powerful societies.

Why would they do this? Well, the point of the whole story is that this child whom they visit, Jesus, is destined to be not only the king of the Jews, but the king of all the world.

Now, last week we saw in the end of Matthew 1 that Jesus is the savior. That's what his name means. Jesus, Joshua, the Lord saves. That he's come to save or rescue his people from their sins. And we saw that Jesus is Emmanuel. That he's God who's come to live with us. And here in chapter 2, Matthew wants us to see that Jesus is not only the savior, not only God with us, but he is the king of all the nations of the world.

[6 : 34] Do you notice how many times Jesus is referred to as the king in this story? Verse 2, king of the Jews. Verse 4, the Christ. That word means the Messiah or the anointed one.

Verse 6, a ruler, a shepherd. Of course, Jesus is implicitly contrasted with Herod, who is the king, referred to as king in verse 1, 3, and 9.

Now in this story, we see three groups of people who respond in three different ways to the news about this newborn king. We see Herod, who is hostile.

Herod is willing to chase after Jesus to get rid of him. We see the chief priests and scribes who are complacent. They don't travel anywhere. They just stay put.

And then we see the wise men, who are worshipers. They travel a long way in order to seek this child, in order to devote themselves completely to him.

[7 : 39] Now as we consider their three responses, the question for us is, how do we respond to this news that Jesus is the king? So first, let's look at Herod.

Herod is hostile to Jesus because he's threatened by Jesus. Now at first, Herod pretends to be interested. He says, go and search for him so that I too can come and worship him.

But really, Herod just wants to get rid of Jesus. And if you read later on in the chapter, that becomes very clear. Verse 16, when he can't find Jesus, he makes a decree to kill all the baby boys in the region under two years of age.

Now we know not only from this story, but from other historical accounts that Herod was paranoid, jealous, and ambitious. He was known as perhaps the greatest builder in Jewish history.

He expanded the temple, constructed great fortresses, made a whole new city, the port city of Caesarea, built large ships, but he also murdered one of his wives and two of his sons and many others who weren't related to him.

[8 : 50] According to the Jewish historian Josephus, when Herod became ill and realized he was about to die, he was so concerned that no one would mourn his death that he gave an order that a large group of distinguished men should be killed at the time of his death so that the displays of grief that he craved would take place.

Thankfully, this order was not carried out. Now in one sense, Herod is the hardest character in this story to relate to because he's so cruel. And merciless.

But there's one thing that Herod understood very clearly and very accurately. Herod understood that you cannot have two kings reigning over the same place at the same time.

Herod had ruled for 30 years over Judea and Jerusalem. He was called king of the Jews and he loved to rule his kingdom. He loved to be in charge and he knew that if some child who wasn't even related to him was prophesied to be the next king of the Jews that his days were numbered and his

authority was limited.

That's why he was immediately troubled by the report of a new king. If this Jesus was the true king chosen and appointed by God then Herod must bow his knee to Jesus.

[10:14] And that's the last thing that he wanted to do. And so Herod did everything he could to get rid of Jesus. Now probably none of us here express hostility to Jesus through physical violence.

But let me ask that Jesus' claim to have universal and unlimited authority trouble you. In other words is there some part of your life where you do not want Jesus to be king?

Is there a territory where you want to be in control and you want to make the final decisions and you do not want anyone including Jesus to tell you otherwise?

Maybe it's your career ambitions. You feel threatened if anything gets in the way of them. Or your sex life.

Jesus' commands seem unreasonable and restrictive. Or your money. You just want to ignore what Jesus says about money.

[11:26] You might feel threatened in some part of your life by Jesus' commands or even simply by his presence. Jesus said no one can serve two masters.

Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. In other words Jesus is either Lord of all or he is not Lord at all.

And in all his madness and cruelty this was the one thing that Herod rightly perceived. And he responded by trying to get rid of Jesus.

Of course Herod's attempt failed. And the good news is every attempt to get rid of Jesus will ultimately fail. Because Jesus is Lord.

And one day every knee will bow before him. And every tongue will confess either willingly or unwillingly that he is Lord. Herod's life ended with him trapped in his own fear, paranoia, and ambition.

[12:34] he died a terribly painful death. Because he was never and he did not turn and be reconciled to this Lord.

So Herod's example is a warning. And I pray that we may not be like Herod. That we may not be hostile to Jesus' authority and trapped in our own self-centered ambitions.

Christians. But maybe we don't feel like Herod, but the second group of people we see in the story are the chief priests and the scribes. Now the chief priests and the scribes are not actively hostile to Jesus.

They don't try to get rid of him, but they don't show any interest. They're complacent. They're apathetic. Herod comes to them with a question. Where is the Messiah to be born?

And they answer immediately, quoting chapter and verse from the Bible. They know the Bible well. In fact, they quote from Micah and they connect it with what God had said in 2 Samuel 5 to David, that he would be the shepherd of the people Israel.

[13:44] They can even string two Bible passages together from two different parts of the Old Testament. And surely they had heard the report of the wise men. Verse 3 says that all Jerusalem was troubled by the report, so surely they knew where the question was coming from.

There's this news that a new king has been born. Perhaps he's the Messiah. And Bethlehem is only six miles away from Jerusalem. You could walk there in two hours.

And yet, they don't seem to bother to go and check it out. They don't go anywhere. They answer the question, they know the Bible, but they don't seek after Jesus.

You see, it's possible to know the Bible very well and to be able to quote it, to impress everyone else, and still have a heart that is cold and indifferent toward Jesus.

You know, you can do a Master's of Divinity. You can do a Ph.D. in Biblical Studies. You can become a pastor or a seminary professor and end up skeptical and critical and cynical of everyone else in the church who hasn't been enlightened.

[15:03] Now, if you're a Div school student, you might be saying, well, yeah, that's true. I feel like that's true of some of my professors. They know a lot of Bible and ancient texts, but they don't love Jesus. But you know, I'm not talking about your professors.

Because they're, for the most part, probably not here today. I want to speak to you who are here. If you're in Divinity School, are you attending to your spiritual life while you're studying?

You're growing in knowledge about the Bible and about theology and church history. Are you seeking just as diligently to grow in your obedience to God, in your devotion to Jesus, in your

dependence on the Holy Spirit, in your service to God's people? love. The Apostle Paul says, mere knowledge puffs up. It can make you proud. But love builds up. Love seeks to strengthen the whole community.

Now, I've been to seminary myself. I understand. It's a challenging place. You see, the problem for many people who study religion in an academic context is that their knowledge increases greatly, and their Christian maturity increases only slightly, if at all.

[16:25] And so there's this increasing gap where you have all this growing knowledge that you're not living out, life. And that's a spiritual danger whenever that happens. And it opens the door to things like pride and hypocrisy.

Going to seminary or divinity school can be one of the most spiritually challenging times of your entire life. Almost nobody expects that or thinks of it that way. It's a spiritual battleground.

So, brothers and sisters, be aware of the spiritual battle that you are involved in every day. Don't sacrifice your devotion to Jesus on the altar of academic respectability and success.

Don't let your life become so dominated by the demands of your classes that you end up with all A's, but never get meaningfully involved in the life of a local church, God's people, who Jesus died for.

You see, God has brought you here. Students, God has brought you here so that you can learn from an elderly person who has walked with Jesus their whole life. So that you can come alongside a new Christian believer and be challenged by their spiritual fervor, even as you encourage and train them.

[17:49] So you can learn to communicate biblical truth in a way that four and five-year-olds can understand if you serve in children's ministry. Christian. Now, if you're not in div school, if you're not in seminary, if you have no plans to go there, pray for your brothers and sisters who are.

And come alongside them and encourage them in their love for Jesus. You know, even if you're not studying religion, the culture of many academic institutions fosters a mindset of critical thinking, where you're expected to write papers making persuasive arguments that you don't even believe. And it can foster a kind of complacency, a kind of smugness, a kind of distance, as if all knowledge is a game. And the goal of gaining knowledge is to impress others. But if that's what knowledge is all about, it's empty.

It's meaningless. The scribes give a technically correct answer, but they don't get anywhere. In their complacency, they miss out on Jesus.

Let's not miss out. So we see Herod, who is hostile. We see the chief priests, who are complacent. And finally, we see the wise men, who come to worship.

[19:08] Now, most of us, when we hear the word wise men or wise people, we generally have positive ideas. But in the minds of faithful Jews or early Christians, wise men would have been seen in an almost entirely negative light.

The most unlikely candidates to perceive spiritual truth. Now, the term wise men is a translation of the Greek word magi. It's where we get the word magic or magician.

And in other contexts, magi refers to astrologers who looked for meaning and guidance in the movements of the stars. or sorcerers or wizards who dabbled in the occult.

Or pagan priests or advisors to pagan kings. In fact, throughout the Bible, references to magi, apart from this passage, are almost overwhelmingly negative. So Pharaoh's magicians in Exodus attempt to duplicate the plagues.

In Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar's magicians try to interpret his dreams unsuccessfully. In the book of Acts, Simon, the magician in chapter 8, amazes the people with his magic and tries to convince them that he's somebody great.

[20:21] In Acts 13, there's a guy named Aemus who's a magician and false prophet who seeks to turn people away from the gospel of Jesus. In Acts 19, the Christian believers in Ephesus who had practiced magic confessed their sins and burned their books.

Of all things. So if you were an early Christian and you gathered with other Christians and you heard this story read for the first time that a group of magicians came all the way from who knows where and worshiped Jesus, you'd be surprised.

It would never be a story that you would make up because it would be so unexpected. It's sort of like saying the local horoscope reader came to church and gave their whole fortune in the offering.

You sort of think, what's going on? That sounds a little weird. But they were drawn. Even though they were in some people's minds the most unlikely candidates to perceive the truth, they were drawn to seek Jesus.

They were drawn by this star. Interestingly enough, God communicates to them in a way that they understood. They spent a lot of time looking at stars.

[21 : 47] They probably had some superstitious beliefs about stars, but they see this star, which is something that they can understand, and yet it points them to seek something that they don't yet understand.

It wasn't an ordinary star. Not only did it rise, it went before them and came to rest over the place where the child lay. The star behaves a little bit like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness at night, and the pillar of cloud by day.

In other words, it was a supernatural guidance of some kind. It wasn't just an unusual comet. Now they're led by this star.

And the Magi seek after Jesus with great eagerness and diligence. They travel for hundreds of miles over dangerous roads. They leave behind the comfort and security of their home country. They come to Jerusalem and they ask for directions. Now when's the last time you've seen a group of several grown men asking for directions, willingly? I wasn't among them.

[22 : 56] Right? And when the local religious leaders are complacent, they're not deterred by that. They're not discouraged by the complacency of the religious leaders. They keep following the star all the way to Bethlehem.

They find an ordinary house in an unassuming small town. But when they reach their destination, they're not disappointed by how ordinary it is.

They're overjoyed. And then they bow before Jesus and present him with lavish offerings fit for a king. You might ask, what motivated them?

What drove them to do this crazy trip? They saw that this child, Jesus, is a priceless treasure like nothing else.

And so when they saw him, it was worth it. It was worth all the trouble of the journey. And when they finally got there, they rejoiced. It says they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

[24 : 02] That's like more superlatives than you can possibly grammatically put in the same sentence. Rejoice. It could have just said they rejoiced.

That would have been enough. It could have just said rejoice exceedingly. Rejoice exceedingly with great joy. They're jumping up and down. I don't know how they expressed it.

However they expressed their joy, they were overjoyed. And they presented Jesus with their most precious treasures. You see, they began the farthest away. But they ended up in the presence of the king himself.

That's the irony. Jesus is ignored and rejected by the people who are closest to him. Who know the most about him. Who live just around the corner.

And can access him most easily. And he's sought after and found by people who are far off. Who are foreigners and outsiders. Now maybe you're here.

[25 : 02] Maybe you're from a part of the world where very few people are Christians. Or maybe you're from a family where nobody else believes that Jesus is the Messiah.

Maybe you've come here to New Haven for a time and for some reason you're drawn to learn more about Christianity. Or maybe you just came to church because a friend invited you.

And you thought, why not? I respect my friend. I'll come along with him. Well, this story is good news for you. Because it says that Jesus wants to include people in his kingdom, in his family, from every part of the world.

Christianity is not just a religion for Western people. It is not just for people who grew up with Christian parents. Christianity is for people from all nations.

And all backgrounds. If you don't yet believe in Jesus, keep on seeking until you find the truth about him. God might not send you a bright light in the sky.

[26 : 10] But maybe he has put a Christian friend in your path. Or a book. Or something to draw you to seek after this Jesus.

This is the most important thing that you can learn while you're here in New Haven. It's about this Jesus.

So let me encourage you to seek after him until you find. Even in the Old Testament, God had always planned to shine his glory to the ends of the earth.

The people of Israel were called to be a light to the nations. And a few times in the Old Testament we see this theme. In 1 Kings 10, the Queen of Sheba comes from far away bringing gold and spices to King Solomon.

And she praises him for his wisdom. Isaiah 60 says, Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your rising. They shall bring gold and frankincense and they shall bring good news.

[27 : 17] The praises of the Lord. The Lord. You see, the wise men were fulfilling that very pattern. And at the end of the Bible, Revelation 21 says that the same thing will happen in even greater number.

The kings of the earth will bring their glory into the new Jerusalem. The nations will present their most valuable treasures to Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords. You know, why do you present valuable gifts to someone?

Why do you buy something for somebody else for their birthday or for Christmas or for some occasion? It's because you value them. It's because you want to honor them.

It's because they're worth all the money you pay for that gift and a lot more. And the wise men brought their most precious gifts to Jesus because he was worth it to them.

And Revelation says that in the new Jerusalem there will be no need of sun or moon because the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is Jesus the Lamb who will reign forever and ever.

[28 : 27] You see, the picture we see of the wise men coming and being and joyfully bringing their treasures to Jesus is only a glimpse of what will happen one day. And on that day the Christmas carol will have its fullest meaning.

Joy to the world. The Lord is come. Let earth receive her king. Now until that day we're on a long painful dangerous journey.

As we walk through the wilderness of life on earth and sometimes the journey seems to go on and on through strange lands uninhabited deserts deserts chaotic inns sometimes the road ahead might seem very dark but brothers and sisters as we walk this road dark as it may seem at times may we look forward to the day as the wise men ardently longed to see this king may we look forward to the day when we will see the king Jesus in his beauty when we will see him face to face and when we will dwell in his light and his joy forever.

Let us pray. Let us pray. Almighty God you revealed your son Jesus to the nations of the world by the leading of a star.

We pray that you would lead us to long for your presence Lord to do whatever it takes to seek after you knowing that you have promised that to all who seek they will find because Lord we don't seek you on our own initiative wise men sought after you because they were drawn by a star and Lord we seek after you because you have drawn us so Lord we pray that you would encourage us to seek after you with all of our hearts knowing that you have promised one day to return and to reveal your glory in all its fullness to everyone who looks to you we pray this in

[31 : 19] Jesus name amen