

Sermon for January 6, 2013 - Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-23

What manger scene is complete without the three wise men? They are a favorite subject of Christian art. Depicted as kings, they kneel before baby Jesus who is lying in the manger. Tradition has given them names and suggests that each of the three wise men represents a son of Noah and his corresponding race.

But there is a problem with this picture: 1) The Bible does not tell us how many wise men they were. 2) The Bible does not tell us where they were from. 3) The Bible does not call them kings. 4) The Bible does not give us their names and 5) the Bible most certainly does NOT depict them visiting Jesus while he was lying in the manger. All of this is pure conjecture. The truth is that we know very little about the wise men that visited Jesus, but what the Bible tells us about them is far more beautiful than all the made up stories and traditions surrounding them.

We read:

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

Who were the magi, and where did they come from? The truth is: we don't know.

Magi (from which our English word "magic" comes from) were originally a priestly cast in the ancient world. They were highly educated people who mixed science and spirituality together. They were both astronomers and astrologers. They often served as advisors to pagan kings.

The prophet Daniel served as a magi while the Jews were captive in Babylon. Daniel, of course, did not experiment in the black arts. He was faithful to the LORD in everything. Still, Nebuchadnezzar

. . . appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. (Daniel 5:11)

Some people think that the magi that worshipped Jesus came from the Babylonian area. The assumption is that Daniel, who wore his faith on his sleeve, told an order of Babylonian magi about the coming Christ and how they would recognize him. Again, none of this can be proved.

Others believe that the magi came from Sheba (what is now Ethiopia) because the gifts they offer are similar to what Isaiah says:

And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:6)

The thought here is that King Solomon told the queen of Sheba about the coming Christ when she visited him some 900 years before Jesus birth – and that this tradition was passed down from generation to generation.

The truth of the matter is that we simply don't know where the magi came from, or how they came to know about the Christ.

Matthew tells us that when the Magi got to Jerusalem, they asked:

*"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."
(Matthew 2:2)*

Here we have another mystery: the magi speak of star that lead them to Jesus. The problem is that there is no Old Testament prophecy about a star at Jesus birth. The only possible exception is that of Balaam, who said:

¹⁷ *"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.*
(Numbers 24:17)

But even here, the star is a metaphor for a King who would arise and not an actual star. This is especially clear when you look at the immediate context of this prophecy and sees that it also has fulfillment in the life of King David.

Then there is the problem of the star itself. As we will see, this was no ordinary star the led them. This star moved in a way stars don't normally move. It didn't seem to arouse the curiosity of anyone but the magi who knew what it meant. What was the star like? How did the magi know about it? How did they - non-Jews that they were – know about the Christ?

The truth is: we don't know and will probably never know the answers to these questions this side of heaven. This just goes to show that God's ways are far higher than our ways – and he has ways of accomplishing His will that we know nothing about!

But back to our text. The magi were going around Jerusalem asking people about the Messiah – the newly born King of Israel that all the Jews were supposed to be eagerly expecting. What a shock it must have been that no one seemed to know what the magi were talking about and did not share their joy and enthusiasm. We read:

³ *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* (Matthew 2:3)

King Herod was a tyrant who ruled with an iron fist. He lived his whole life in fear that someone might steal his crown. He killed his sons and wives because he thought they were plotting against him. He killed priests. He killed children. He was so brutal that Caesar Augustus once said something to the effect that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his child.

If there was one thing that would set Herod off, it was any hint of a rival king. The people of Jerusalem knew this all too well. They saw firsthand how bloody Herod could be.

Herod was nervous, but he was smart enough not to let it show. Instead he pretended to be happy about the birth of this Messiah king.

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.'* 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."* (Matthew 2:4-8)

Herod finds out what he needs to know to kill this rival king. He knows the place of his birth and the approximate age of the child. He has everything ready for plan "B" if plan "A" didn't work. What was plan "A"? To get the magi to tell him exactly where Jesus was.

But before we go on, let us take a break and consider the following questions:

What emotion did the news of the Messiah's birth evoke in Jerusalem?

[*Answer:* Instead of joy and hope, terror and apprehension. They were worried about Herod and what He would do more than what God was accomplishing]

What emotions does the news of the Messiah's birth evoke in the world today?

[*Answer:* Among believers - joy and happiness. Among unbelievers – apprehension and suspicion. Why? Because this world is more worried about worldly politics and things than who their spiritual king is.]

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. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. (Matthew 2:9-10)

Here we see how this star was not acting like a normal star. Due to the rotation of the earth a normal star moves east to west. This star travelled north to south. Normal stars also don't just stop. This was not a normal star. No wonder the magi were so happy to see it!

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. (Matthew 2:11)

Notice that the Magi came to a house and not a stable. Most likely the magi visited Mary and Joseph sometime after Jesus was presented at the temple.

Notice that the magi – in spite of Jesus' lowly condition and in spite of the fact that no one (other than King Herod) seemed excited about his birth – the magi immediately bowed down and worshipped Jesus. They honor him as king. They show their faith.

They presented Jesus with gifts that are certainly odd for a child. But they are priceless. Gold is a metal you would find in a king's palace. Frankincense was an ingredient in the incense that was offered on the altar of incense in the temple. Myrrh was an ingredient in the oil used to anoint the priests. Are these facts mere coincidences or do they tell us something about the magi? Scripture doesn't tell us, so it remains a mystery

What is not a mystery is the faith these magi had. A faith that led them to travel a great distance simply to see Jesus and offer their worship. A faith that was unhindered by how things appeared. A faith that was obedient to God, as we read:

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:12)

What do the Magi teach us about our priorities in life?

[Answer: "To seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." They put the promise of the Savior ahead of everything. They put their life back in their country of origin on hold so they could worship the Savior. He was their highest treasure – and at great cost they went to worship him. They also did not let "how things look" deter them from trusting God's promises.]

Even though the magi returned by another route – and thus avoided Herod – the LORD knew that his Son was in danger.

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." ¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." (Matthew 2:13-15)

This prophet quoted by Matthew is Hosea, who wrote:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. (Hosea 11:1)

Just like Israel and his sons went from Canaan to Egypt to find refuge from famine, so also Jesus was taken to Egypt for refuge as well. And like Israel, Jesus would be called out of Egypt back to Canaan. Why? Because God loved him.

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Matthew 2:16-18)

If you were to know the history of Herod, you would see that this horrendous crime is “par for the course” when it comes to this wicked king. He was brutal. There was no mercy when it came to protecting his throne.

The fact that Herod killed all the boys 2 years old or less does not mean Jesus was 2 years old. He could have been less than two. We can certainly imagine Herod giving himself a generous “margin of error” to make sure He got Jesus in the slaughter.

Given the size of Bethlehem at that time, it is estimated that 20 – 25 died in this massacre – about the same number that were killed last month at Sandy Hill Elementary school in Connecticut. What tragic events both of them were! Matthew describes it in the words of Jeremiah:

"A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more." (Jeremiah 31:15)

Rachel was the beloved wife of Israel. She died giving birth to Benjamin and was buried near Bethlehem. She stands symbolic for the mothers of Israel.

Ramah (which was near Rachel’s tomb) was the place where many Jews were sent off to Babylon in captivity. It is in this context that Jeremiah originally spoke the words quoted in our text.

What is interesting about the original context of this prophecy is that God promises hope and deliverance. Jeremiah continues:

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. ¹⁷ So there is hope for your future," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land (Jeremiah 31:16-17)

Theologians have often called these massacred infants Christ’s first martyrs. I can’t tell you whether this description is accurate or not, but I can say this: Just as God promised hope for the families torn apart at Ramah during the Babylonian captivity, so God also offered hope to those parents who lost their sons to Herod. Those who looked to the LORD in faith would see their children again. Where? Home, in their own land – which is heaven.

Some people might wonder. Why did God allow the tragedy that happened in Bethlehem when he could have stopped it? Truth be told: we simply don’t know and we will probably never know this side of heaven. We simply trust God’s word, which says that. . .

in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

We trust that the LORD, the judge of all the earth, will do right - because it is impossible for him to do anything wrong.

What does this account tell us about the wickedness of mankind?

[*Answer:* That the wickedness of man’s heart knows no bounds. There is potential for great evil. We need a Savior.]

Where do we turn for comfort when facing tragedy like this?

[*Answer:* The cross of Christ which shows us God’s great love and promises of salvation. We turn to Christ – remembering his promise to come again. We look to Christ, trusting that He is in control and uses everything to accomplish his purposes – which is salvation.]

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." ²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. (Matthew 2:19-21)

History records that Herod pretty much rotted to death from gangrene and worms. He was buried at the Herodium, which was just outside of Bethlehem – near the place Jesus was born and the place where Herod's soldiers massacred the infants. God took Herod's crown away from him – as well as his life. It was safe for Mary, Joseph and Jesus to return.

²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, (Matthew 2:22)

Archelaus succeeded Herod in becoming ethnarch of Judea. His brother Antipas, was appointed tetrarch of Galilee. Archelaus was brutal. Antipas (the Herod who killed John the Baptist) was a little less dangerous than his brother, so the LORD directed Joseph to take Jesus to Galilee.

He went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene." (Matthew 2:23)

Now it must be admitted, that this verse is hard. What does Matthew mean when he says that this was to fulfill what the prophets said? There is not a single Old Testament prophecy regarding Nazareth.

The key to understanding this difficult verse is the fact that Matthew says: "*So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets*" and not "*prophet*". Matthew is not thinking of one particular prophecy, but all of them. All of them that describe Jesus as being despised and lowly – a man who was not esteemed.

To call someone a Nazarene was a slight, as we see in Nathanael's response to Phillip news about Jesus:

⁴⁶ "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" (John 1:46)

Yet, it was the LORD's will that Jesus come from there and be despised and rejected by the people.

How does God direct us to where He wants us to live and to do what He wants do?

[*Answer*: Just as he used the events and affairs around Jesus to place him where he wanted him to be, so also the LORD uses the events and affairs around us, to get us to be where he wants us to be and do what he wants us to do. He does this all with a purpose in mind: "²⁷ *God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*" (Acts 17:27) God wants us to know him and his salvation. Let us then listen to the Word, which is our star that leads us to our Savior Jesus Christ, and worship Jesus!]