

COTR - 12/06/2020

Advent 2020

Bringing in the Kingdom

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First Reading: Micah 5:1-4

Title: To Seek and Worship the True King (The Visit of the Magi)

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Theme: The story of the magi teaches us about seeking and worshiping the true King. Details from the book of Matthew point to Jesus as the true King of the Jews and the Savior and King of all. We all face a choice to accept this King and worship him. His promise is sure; those who seek him, will find him.

The visit of the magi or wisemen is probably one of the most well-known aspects of the Christmas story. I know when I was a little kid, I loved the part in the story where the stately foreigners arrived and presented their precious gifts to Jesus. There was a sense of mystery and awe that they brought to the scene. It seemed extraordinary that people like them would seek out baby Jesus.

There are quite a few traditions that we often assume or repeat about their visit. They are reflected in our nativity scenes that reinforce them. First, when we tell the Christmas story, we often have the magi enter the scene at the stable right after the shepherds and then all gather around the newborn Jesus in the manger. Second, we often assume that there were three magi because there were three gifts. Third, we often repeat the idea that the magi were kings and we even sing about it. In some Christian denominations there are even elaborate traditions about where the magi came from, what countries, kingdoms, and cultures they represented. The difficulty is that many of these traditions are actually inaccurate or unfounded assumptions. If you are attached to them, sorry for bursting your bubble, but bear with me.

Rereading the Story

Today, I would like to invite us to take a step back and reread the details in Matthew's story and see what they might be

telling us anew, especially about what it means to seek and worship Jesus. As the book of Matthew will show us, Jesus was the true King of the Jews. He was also King and Savior for all. And we all have a choice to make about whether to seek and worship this one true King.

There are a few important details from Matthew's story that need to be pointed out initially because they correct some of the inaccuracies of the traditions. First, Matthew says that the star stopped over the "house" where Jesus was. This detail indicates that the magi arrived after Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had found a more permanent place to live in Bethlehem. Second, later in Matthew 2:16 we find out that Herod had asked the magi when the star had first appeared and it had been two years prior, so Jesus was likely a toddler by the time they arrived. Third, Matthew also never mentions the number of magi, he just uses the plural, so the number of magi could have been anywhere from two to twenty or more. The exact number was not recorded. Finally, although tradition often calls them kings, their title "magi" indicates that they were in fact wisemen who studied the stars. However, they likely served as advisors in the courts of their kings.

So now that we are all picturing a humble house, a toddler Jesus, and two or more stately foreign men arriving in Bethlehem, I would like to invite you think about what it might have been like for the magi to visit Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Keep in mind that God revealed some things about Jesus to Mary and Joseph, but they didn't know everything that was going to happen.

The magi followed a star, so it was likely nighttime when they arrived at the house in Bethlehem. Imagine you are Joseph answering the knock at the door and seeing these stately foreign men outside. Shock, awe, wonder. What did they say that makes you allow them in? Or just imagine you are Mary, slightly worn out and frazzled from taking care of the needs of your household and an active toddler. It is nighttime, maybe you just changed Jesus or soothed his crying. You are tired. All of a sudden there are strangers bowing down before you in your tiny home in the middle of the night as you hold your toddler. We know that Mary had a humble and submissive heart toward God and welcoming strangers into one's home might have been more common back then, but I am thinking she was probably like, "Joseph, what are you doing letting these men into the house at this time of night?!"

This child has to sleep, I'm exhausted. What is going on?" The whole scene is quite startling when you think about experiencing it.

And there are certainly other questions that remain unanswered. The book of Matthew leaves out a lot of details. For instance, what caused the magi to make their journey in the first place? Why would foreigners seek out another country's king via a long journey? Why would they want to worship him?

While Matthew does not answer these questions definitively, we can make some educated guesses based on what we do know. Magi was the title given to wisemen in Babylon and Persia (present day Iraq and Iran), both countries east of Judea. Additionally, Jews and other Israelites were previously taken into captivity by both these kingdoms and some were even appointed as advisors or even spouses of their Kings. Think Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Esther and Mordecai. Perhaps they shared their hope for a Messiah and the prophecies about him with their captors. After all, the Old Testament scriptures indicated that the Messiah who would come from the line of Judah and David was to be the savior of the whole world. For instance, the promise God made to Abraham was that "all peoples on earth [would] be blessed through [him]." **Genesis 12:3b**. This was an early reference to the coming Messiah. Maybe that knowledge got passed down. Although we do not definitely know the answers to these questions today, the details that Matthew did include have a purpose and point us somewhere.

The True King

The author of the book of Matthew wrote his book to the Jewish people to convince them that Jesus was the Messiah, both King and Savior. In the first two chapters he shows that Jesus was the true King of the Jews. For instance, he took pains at the beginning of chapter 1 to trace Jesus' lineage from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and King David. Jesus had the right ancestors to claim Jewish kingship.

The Bible uses the idea of King and Kingdom repeatedly to describe the nature of God and his authority. In fact, to begin with, God, Yahweh, was Israel's king. Therefore, the author of Matthew also took pains to trace Jesus' ancestry directly to God. In the second half of chapter 1, we learn that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus' claim to kingship was both

physical and spiritual. He was a special kind of King; he was the Messiah sent from God to save his people.

Why does all this matter? As citizens of a modern democracy, the ideas of a king and a kingdom are quite foreign. They ring of ancient history, tyranny, or simply ceremonial roles that engender frenzied paparazzi chases. A kingdom in the traditional sense was a realm or region that had a king as its head; he reigned sovereign. What that means is that there could only be one king per kingdom.

King Herod, or "Herod the Great," knew this all too well. He was not born a king. He was appointed as one by the Romans. He was an Idumaeen or Edomite, a descendant of Esau. In other words, he was from the "wrong" line of Isaac's sons and Abraham's grandsons. Although Idumaeans embraced Jewish religious practices, Jews viewed them suspiciously and considered them to be "half Jews." Herod was no exception.

He received the title "great" because of all the architectural projects and monuments that he undertook during his reign. He did this partially to win over the Jews, especially when he restored the temple in Jerusalem.

Herod knew all too well that he had no valid claim to the Jewish throne by blood. He retained his power through cunning, ruthlessness, and cruel treatment of anyone he suspected of treason, including and especially his own family. He killed at least one of his wives and several sons.

So, it is no wonder then that in chapter 2 when these foreign dignitaries started asking around Jerusalem about a newborn king in Judea that Herod was troubled by the news. He eventually sent for the magi and tried to enact a crafty plan for finding and taking out this king.

For Herod, this was the ultimate clash of kings and kingdoms. He was fighting for his power. In reality, he had a choice. Nothing said he could not accept and follow Jesus too. He knew the scriptures enough to ask the right questions. He even feigned interest in worshiping Jesus. Herod knew that he was not the true King of the Jews, and he did not realize that Jesus did not come to upset the political order in the way most people expected. Jesus' kingdom was a different kind of Kingdom; it was one of the heart. Herod could have chosen to accept Jesus as the Savior and King, but he wanted to be King more than find the

Savior. Ultimately, he became an enemy of God; he sought Jesus to destroy him.

The King and Savior for All

The magi on the other hand, when given a choice between Jesus and Herod, chose Jesus. But why would the true King of the Jews matter to foreigners? What could be in it for them? And why would they seek him to worship him, an act reserved for deities? The only logical conclusion is that the magi must have believed what Herod refused to acknowledge, that the newborn King was actually the savior of the entire world; he was God in the flesh.

The magi's very presence in the advent narrative speaks volumes about Jesus' kingdom. It is a kingdom where Jesus shows himself to those who seek him, not necessarily to the insider, to the most holy, to the priest, or to the temple-goer. It is a kingdom where the outsider comes in.

The narrative of advent as told in Matthew leaves out many interesting and important facts that are found in the other gospels. We do not see Mary and Joseph journey to Bethlehem or Jesus being born. The story moves swiftly from a genealogy to Joseph agreeing to take pregnant Mary as his wife because she has supernaturally conceived. Then it jumps forward to the visit of the magi sometime after Jesus' birth. What the book of Matthew leaves out in the nitty gritty details of everyday life, it makes up for in cosmic and supernatural occurrences. These occurrences point to the universality of Jesus' Kingship.

Besides Mary and Joseph, the magi, the foreigners, were the ones who received and acted on these cosmic signs. The magi noted, interpreted, and acted upon the appearance of the star in the heavens. A star that ultimately led them to Jesus' home.

The magi were some of the first true worshipers of Jesus. They fulfilled such prophecies about the Messiah as **Isaiah 49:6** that records the Lord saying,

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

It seems that as foreigners the magi were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus as Messiah.

The magi played another important role. Through their gifts they likely supplied the means for Mary and Joseph to live when they later fled to Egypt.

Finally, God spoke to the magi in a supernatural dream. The only other person given that privilege in the story was Joseph. They were instrumental in protecting toddler Jesus and his parents.

As the magi sought Jesus in their long quest, a quest that might even have started before the star appeared two years before, God met them, led them, and guided them. They treated Jesus like the King that he was when few others did that initially. They showed us that ultimately, Jesus' Kingdom is for all who seek to worship him.

Seek and Worship the King

What does Jesus' Kingship have to do with us today? I think for one it shows us that we have a choice. There is only room for one King in our lives and in our hearts.

The magi chose Jesus over Herod. Herod even had a choice, but he was too caught up in his own power to see the true mission of Jesus. Isn't that often true of you and me? We would much rather be the rulers of our own lives and do what we want. But today, Jesus is asking us, "Will you choose me? Will you accept me as your true King?" He comes to us as a humble toddler, not barging in or threatening us like Herod did. It is a simple invitation to seek him and worship him like the magi, to accept him as the King of our lives. As the magi did, we worship by laying down our lives in front of Jesus, submitting to his authority in our lives and seeking God in our decisions. We may not receive stars and dreams, but God will be faithful to guide us.

Second, it is an invitation to all those who feel like they are on the outside looking in. There is a place for you at the feet of Jesus. As you seek him and accept him as King in your heart, one simple act of worship is to bring your gifts and lay them down. Our gifts may not be of the rare kind brought by the magi, but the gifts of our time, our talents, our treasure can do much in his Kingdom.

Finally, the visit of the magi should give us hope. It shows us that those who seek, find. Although the journey might be long like it was for the magi, as it promises later in Matthew, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives;

the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened." **Matthew 7:7-8.**

Wherever you might be, whomever you might be, God's desire is that you come to know him, the true King of all, and enter into abundant life in his Kingdom. That is my prayer for you and all who are far and near this Christmas.