

January 2, 2022
Pilgrims on the Road
Matthew 2:1–12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Please pray with me...

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Most of us are familiar with the “Three Wise Men.” If we weren’t in church, the “three wise men,” might sound like the punchline to a joke.

The number of people in the party from the East who travel to see the new-born king, is unknown. It could be five. It could be twelve. People often latch on to the number three because they brought three gifts. We also don’t know for a fact that they were all men. Finally, they hardly seem wise when they go to King Herod, a megalomaniac, and ask where they might find his replacement. No one would call that wise.

What about “we three kings?” There is a verse in Isaiah that talks about kings coming to worship the God of Israel and bringing gold and incense (60:3,6), but Matthew doesn’t call them kings. According to New Testament and Jewish Scholar AJ Levine, Matthew’s magi weren’t often referred to as kings until Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Constantine saw the Greek letters *chi* and *rho* in the heavens – which he then associated with the Bethlehem star. Constantine was able to use this for his political benefit using this logic:

“Just as the kings, paid homage to Jesus by following his star, so the kings of earth should pay homage to the emperor by following his sign.”¹

If we strip away the images we have created about these visitors from the East, what do we have left? Who are they and why are they?

Matthew has his own way of telling the story of Jesus’ birth. His writing is genius as he weaves together stories and characters, past and present, to tell his audience and us, that Jesus is born for all people, Jews and Gentiles – and Jesus is the one to follow – the light of the world.

Matthew is full of surprises. Before we encounter the magi of Chapter 2, and before Jesus birth is announced, you have to wade through Matthew’s opener – a genealogy a mile long. Your first thought is, “BORING!” Skip this! You would think a great writer would know better than to start a great story with who begat who. But this is no ordinary genealogy. Matthew is shaking the family tree hard and out falls a handful of women; women with complicated, perhaps even scandalous, stories attached to them. Tamar, she is the woman who manipulated her father-in-law, Judah, to impregnate her after he refused to marry his third son to her. Then there is Rahab, the Canaanite, who ran a brothel and hid a couple of Joshua’s spies to be spared in the fall and destruction of Jericho. Why his spies were in a brothel is a sermon for another day. Then there is Ruth, a Moabite, who, after being widowed, pledged her allegiance to her mother-in-law and followed her back to Israel where together they plotted the seduction of Boaz, who went on to marry Ruth. The last woman Matthew includes, is not mentioned by name but we know who she is. Matthew calls her the wife of Uriah, the Hittite. The jury is still out on whether she was a victim of King David, or initiated their illicit encounter, but we do know that David killed Uriah to cover up their affair and later took her as his wife.

Looming over Matthew’s genealogy is King David. It is broken down into fourteen generation sections and fourteen was the number associated with David. It concludes with the final begat of Joseph, Jesus’ father. He says the father of Joseph is Jacob. (Luke says a different name.) Those two names together, Jacob and Joseph, would have triggered the imaginations of anyone who knew the story of Jacob and Joseph found in the Book of Genesis. Joseph was Jacob’s favored son, and he had the ability to interpret dreams and was able to save his family by bringing them to Egypt.

So, when Matthew finally gets to the story of Jesus’ origins – the story begins with a woman in a scandalous situation and a man who is willing to be sympathetic to her. He is willing to dismiss her quietly, but is told, in a dream, to marry her and name the baby, Jesus. Joseph will later take his family to Egypt to save them...but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Matthew announces Jesus’ birth through Joseph the dreamer. There is no census or long journey or search for an inn – just a dream and then Jesus is born.

¹ A J Levine, “Light of the World: A Beginners Guide to Advent,” p. 128.

Enter the Magi. Who are they? Were they magicians, fortune tellers, astrologers, or astronomers? Despite my previous comments about it not being wise to go to Herod, it is plausible that they were wise, perhaps even the scientists of their day. One thing we know for certain is that they are foreigners. They are gentiles and outsiders, and yet, they have the sense to find the new-born king. All the while, Herod's own priests and prophets, who are supposed to be the experts, and even know to point the Magi in the direction of Bethlehem, don't bother to go themselves.

While the idea of the Magi stopping first at Herod's palace seems laughable – it is more plausible that Matthew is making a point. Outsiders, foreigners, gentiles receive the message of Jesus while many you might expect to receive it, do not.

Much has been made regarding the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but not by Matthew. He doesn't interpret their meaning. There is no grand gift-opening or "thank you" from the holy family. What is important for the story are not the presents but their presence. AJ Levine says their presence indicates:

- Jesus' universal rule – to the ends of the earth – Gentiles and Jews
- The yielding of all ancient wisdom to Jesus
- And the honor he receives from the equivalent of ancient science²

Their bowing and adoration elevates Jesus.

The story ends with the Magi being warned in a dream to skip Herod's palace and take a different route home. (Matt 2:12) The Greek word for "route" is *hodos*. Before people were ever called Christians they were called, "followers of the *hodos*," the way.³ I don't know if Matthew was making that specific connection as he wrote those words – but it speaks to me.

Some of you know that I am a big fan of Father Greg Boyle, priest, author, and founder of Homeboy Industries. His newest book came out last month titled, "The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness." He makes mention of the Magi in the introduction of his book and invites the reader to "depart by a different route." He invites us to travel the way of the mystic, "replacing fear with love, vindictiveness with open-hearted kindness, envy with supportive affection, withering judgment with extravagant tenderness. Now is the time to embrace something other than combat."⁴

There is a route that will lead us back into the trap of Herod and there is a route that will lead us to God and to life and to joy. Which route will you choose?

To choose the way of Jesus is to be gracious to the Tamars, Rahabs, Ruths, Bathshebas, and Marys of our own time and refrain from judgement.

² Levine, p. 134

³ *ibid*

⁴ Gregory Boyle, "The Whole Language," pp. xv-xvi

To choose the way of Jesus is to choose to be a peacemaker.

To choose the way of Jesus is to choose compassion over being right.

To choose the way of Jesus is to forgive as you have been forgiven, turn the other cheek, and to let your light shine.

To choose the way of Jesus is to give the cup of water, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry and welcome the stranger.

To choose the way of Jesus is to become a seeker of the just, loving, and merciful kingdom of God.

To choose the way of Jesus is to stop beating the drum about what you believe and to start pounding the pavement with how you behave.

To choose the way of Jesus is to invite others to join you on the way – to seek – to find – and to rejoice...and to choose the way of Jesus – again and again.

The Magi make their choice. And as the story continues, we see they have made the right choice. Herod is exposed and his ways are exposed. People are expendable when it comes to getting what you want. Violence, cruelty, bloodshed, abuse, oppression, and exploitation are the ways of Herod. And the wailing can still be heard.

With the Magi, may we seek, find, and choose another way...the Jesus way...the way of love.