

**January 1, 2022 (New Years Day)**

**Sermon: We Keep Seeking**

**Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12**

Matthew 2:1-12

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

*<sup>6</sup> '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.' "*

*<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> 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.

The word is not actually in the story, and yet we often associate the word "seek" with the story of the magi. These mysterious travelers from the East set out on a journey, inspired by a celestial event. They see a star; a star that says to them a child has been born and this child is the King of the Jews. So you see, they were seeking, long before they saw that star, and because they were seeking, they saw it.

I suppose the obvious question is, "Why would they care?" They are not Jewish, at least we don't think so. Yet, they are compelled to seek out this child and pay homage. Perhaps they are seekers of a larger truth; a truth that transcends religion and borders. Not all that different, I suppose, from people like us seeking out the wisdom of Rumi, or Kahlil Gibran, or the Dali Lama, or Thich Nat Hanh.

The Magi did not leave a travel log. We know nothing of their journey, or if there were camels, or if they were all men, or if there were three. They are not kings, despite what the song says.

They are Magi. Most likely astrologers or Zoroastrian priests. No one knows for sure. They are vague and mysterious characters, foreigners from the East. They are seekers.

The star that sparks their journey does not lead them to Bethlehem, at least not initially. It is not a divine laser pointer. It does not lead the way to Herod's door. It appears and disappears, and its appearance launches their journey. They set out in search of the new "King of the Jews" the star was announcing.

But wait, the Jews already have a king, King Herod. Herod's official title was "King of the Jews." He was formally appointed by the Roman Senate, and he didn't take kindly to any threat to his throne. He was infamous for killing any potential threat to his throne, including his own children.

Anyone hearing this story in the first century, would know about Herod, and his official title, and the absurdity of these allegedly wise people from the East asking him where his successor might be. "Why on earth would they go to Herod?"

The Magi, suffer from what one commentator calls, "The Jerusalem bias."<sup>1</sup> They naturally go to where one might expect to find a king, the center of power; Jerusalem. And the gifts they are carrying are perfect for a worldly king, who lives in a palace, and expects expensive tributes.

So, they head to Jerusalem and inquire about this newborn king of the Jews. Herod, pretending not to be disturbed or alarmed, calls together chief priests and scribes and asks them what they know about a new royal being born. They scour scripture and find a verse from the prophet Micah that says the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Herod, pretending to be sincere, tells the Magi to go to Bethlehem, and to let him know where they find him, so he can pay homage as well. Yeah right.

This whole scene would be funny if Herod's ego wasn't so fragile, and his wrath so devastating. And isn't interesting that the chief priests and scribes can "give directions to these misguided strangers, but not take directions themselves?"<sup>2</sup> You would think they would be interested in seeking out the promised Messiah.

It is at this point in the story that the star reappears, and guides the Magi to the child Jesus, in a house. Upon seeing Jesus, the Magi are overcome with joy, and they offer their gifts, which now seem a bit extravagant. But they offer them, just the same, to a child, in a house, in a little town, not known for much except for being the birthplace of King David.

No words are exchanged. We don't hear Mary saying, "You shouldn't have!" Joseph doesn't intervene saying, "I can't accept this." Gifts are given, homage is paid. This is the King of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bertram, Robert W. "An Epiphany Crossing: Programming Matthew 2:1-12 for Readers Today." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 7, no. 6 (December 1980): 328-36.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

Jews to whom they bow. I know some people like to interpret the gifts as symbols. Perhaps they are. But according to Jewish New Testament Scholar, AJ Levine, “The import for Matthew is their presence. (that’s presence with a “c”)<sup>3</sup> As we learned the first week of Advent, Matthew includes foreign women, associated with sexual scandals, in the genealogy of Jesus, and when Jesus is born, Magi from the east are the first ones to recognize him as king.

Warned in a dream to forget going back to Herod, they go home by a different route. It’s interesting that Matthew uses a very specific word that we translate as route. The Greek for “route” is *hodos*, and one of the few other places it is found is in the Book of Acts where we learn that the people who followed Jesus were called “followers of the way (*hodos*).” The Magi go home by a different way.

There is Herod’s way, and there is Jesus’ way. Herod is paranoid and fearful – but the magi are filled with joy. Priests and insiders don’t bother to travel the six miles to see, but these outsiders travel miles and miles to see. Initially, the natural impulse of the Magi is to go where one might expect to find a king – but God guides them to a place unexpected. And when they depart, they refuse Herod’s way and travel a different way.

When the Magi leave, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, because Herod is about to search for the child and destroy him. So, Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt as refugees, and there they find asylum and live until Herod dies.

As they are fleeing, Herod figures out that the Magi have tricked him, and he is infuriated. And what happens next exposes the depravity of Herod’s way. He orders the death of all the children, two years of age and under, in and around Bethlehem.

Throughout Advent and Christmas, I have tried to point out how the nativity stories are overtures or previews of the gospel that follows. Matthew and Luke tell two distinct stories. Luke, with Mary, Caesar’s census, a manger, shepherds, and the heavenly host. Matthew, with Joseph, dreams, Magi, and Herod.

Matthew is concerned about the inclusion of non-Jews and his genealogy the story of the Magi points to this. He also wants us to understand Jesus as the new Moses, born to deliver God’s people, and so, like Moses, Jesus flees to Egypt then returns. Matthew practically uses a megaphone to distinguish Jesus from Herod. Jesus’ way is not Herod’s way, and the magi discover this. Jesus is born in the city of the shepherd king, David; interpreted as one who cares for his flocks and has compassion for strays. The Magi experience the divine in the unexpected, a theme that is continued when Jesus goes on to say that we will find him in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and the stranger.

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<sup>3</sup> AJ Levine, “Light of the World: A Beginner’s Guide to Advent,” p. 134.

The Gospel of Matthew would make complete sense without the birth story – but like the star shining a spotlight on Jesus, Matthew gives us a reason to care about the King of the Jews and what he is about.

The Magi are seekers, seekers of wisdom, seekers of truth, seekers of the divine. They read the stars, they know their lore, they invest energy in their pursuit, and set out to find. In their process of discovery, they are open to an alternative not previously imagined, and they are changed. And isn't that the invitation of the gospel?

At the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as told by Matthew, Jesus challenges us to be seekers. He calls us to make seeking our highest priority. Do you remember what he told us to seek first? The kingdom of God. (Matt 6:33) Which is what I think those Magi were ultimately seeking. The kingdom of God is bigger than our personal salvation. It's bigger than calling ourselves Christian. The kingdom of God is evident in the noble truths of many of the world's religions. As Christians, we profess that Jesus' way, leads us to the kingdom of God. So, with Jesus as our star, we set out seeking truth, and wisdom, and the divine in all creation. We give our lives to the pursuit of loving our neighbor (which includes our enemies) and forgiving the indebted. We seek first, justice for the oppressed, welcome for the stranger and outcast, compassion for the vulnerable, non-violence, a healed earth, a better world.

The Magi went home by a different way. It is that different way, the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom, that we are called to seek and choose.

"Seek first, the kingdom of God," said Jesus (Matt 6:33) With the Magi, may we seek and discover the Jesus way home. Amen.