

## 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, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## Bowing Down

I find it fascinating how time and events shape our interpretation of the Bible. I've pointed out that Nativity Scenes are a blending of the story of Jesus' birth from two Gospels, Luke and Matthew (there were no shepherds in Matthew and no wise men in Luke). And it makes sense that we would take two stories of the same event and fuse them into one narrative. Matthew and Luke had their own perspectives and each considered different things to be important in the story – Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is Savior of the Gentiles, so he talks about these gentile magi who come to Bethlehem. Luke emphasizes that Jesus is Savior of the poor and the marginalized, therefore it's the shepherds who receive the "good news of great tidings." We fuse these stories together because both are true; Jesus is Savior of the poor as well as the gentile. The narrative we've created from these two stories raises Jesus to a higher level than either of the individual stories do.

Another way this story has been embellished is in regards to the identity of the wise men. These three magi, you may note, are wearing crowns. So here too we find that time and events have led us to re-imagine the story that Matthew writes. While it's true that many kings are wise men, not all kings are wise, and not all wise men are kings. Matthew probably understood these wise men to be scientists, astronomers who noted this unusually bright star and knew something important was happening. One only need look at a map of constellations to know that our ancestors spent a lot of time looking at the stars and charting the movements of heavenly bodies; these were the early days of astronomy, and people understood that the movement of those stars and planets was important. But we have promoted the magi to kings. Why? Again, we re-draw the picture to emphasize that Jesus such a great king that other kings of the earth must bow down to the Christ

Child and pay him homage. These figurines of kings make a greater impression on us than would be the case if they were figurines of scientists, people that looked like Albert Einstein.

And notice that there is no mention of there being THREE magi who come to see Jesus; there may have been two or twenty or more! We associate each of the three gifts to Jesus, the gold, the myrrh and the frankincense, with a single person, hence three magi. What that has done is standardize the Nativity Scene so we don't have some with two magi and others with fifteen. Three is a good number. Different nativity scenes may have different number of shepherds or sheep or donkeys or pigs, but you will always find three kings.

There's one other way that we have re-interpreted Matthew's story; we have given names and ethnicities to these kings; Balthasar, Melchior, and Caspar. The point of having them come from three different geographic regions and representing three distinct ethnicities is to drive in the point that Jesus truly is the king of the entire world.

So all these embellishments go a long way to emphasize just how significant Jesus really is. The shepherds certainly recognize how significant he is; they leave their flocks to go find him. The magi certainly recognize how significant he is; they come from far away to pay homage and give him gifts. **And King Herod certainly recognizes how significant Jesus is, because he fears him and tries to execute him.** Today I want to talk about our approach to Jesus and how we look upon him. Do we pay him homage, or do we try to kill him? And while it is impossible for anyone to literally kill Jesus, we can separate ourselves from him by either denying his lordship or by misrepresenting Jesus. The changes that we have imposed on Matthew's story of Jesus' birth – like changing the wise men into kings, don't cause us to misrepresent Jesus, but when we close our ears to what Jesus says or put words in his mouth that he never uttered, we create a false Jesus and pay homage to *that* Jesus, and so, in a figurative way, we are killing Jesus. And if we are guilty of misrepresenting Jesus, what can we do to get onto the right track, to knowing the TRUE Jesus?

The simplest way is to spend some time reading the New Testament and seeing what Jesus says. He starts declaring that God's kingdom is coming to us and that we must change our evil ways and believe in that kingdom. There are the truths that he taught us – lessons of forgiveness, of kindness, of loving the stranger – truths that we can't argue with. There are the miracles, not the least of which is the Resurrection. So when we take all of these things into account, and when we consider how Jesus met his own death, we declare like the Roman Centurian, "This truly is the Son of God."

And when we come to that realization, we approach it in either of two ways: we either bow down and worship – placing him above ourselves – or we try to kill him. We may try to kill him outright – denying his lordship or even his existence – or we kill him by intentionally misrepresenting him, by turning him into someone that he is not, someone who serves our needs and purposes rather than God's needs and purposes. We say that God justifies our violence against neighbor *in Jesus' name*, that he approves of our greed and indifference to the suffering of others *in Jesus' name*, that it's okay to shun those whose beliefs and backgrounds are different from our own *in Jesus' name*. Our aim is no different from that of King Herod; **we want to stay on the throne and deny Jesus Lordship of our lives.**

But we are called to approach Jesus more like the shepherds and the wise-men-become-kings. We are expected to come to Jesus – the true Jesus - and bow down to Jesus – the true Jesus; not the Jesus that we contrive in order to justify our sin, but the true Jesus, the one who teaches us to care for others, to love those who we find difficult to love, to forgive those who sin against us, even when they sin again and again and again. And by bowing down to Jesus, like the three “kings” bow down to him, we indicate that we are willing to put our will on the sidelines, that we’re willing to follow *his* commandments, that we are ready and willing to be his disciples.

Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” That’s a hard thing to do – to keep Jesus’ commandments. It’s much easier to bow down and worship him...or appear to be worshiping him than it is to keep commandments like, “love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you.” It’s much easier to sing hymns and read scripture and say what a great guy Jesus is, but it’s much harder to follow in his footsteps, to have the courage to touch the leper, to cross the rough sea to heal the mentally ill, to drive out the moneychangers and confront the authorities when they pervert true religion. But I ask you, is it really possible to pay Jesus homage if we don’t follow his commandments? Can we pay him homage without paying him respect by doing the things he commands us to do? Can we “worship” him without *obeying* him? And the answer is “yes, we can.” But it is our motivation that determines whether we are truly worshiping Jesus or not. If we truly love Jesus and understand what he is commanding us to do, yet we fail to do what he commands us to do, and we confess that we have failed to do what he has called us to do, we *can* worship him in spirit and in truth acknowledging our failure to obey him. In a little while we’ll have the service of word and table, and we’ll confess that we have NOT obeyed Jesus, that we have NOT heard the cry of the needy, and we are nonetheless able to worship him despite our failure...because we have humbly confessed that failure and prayed for forgiveness. If, however, we envision Jesus as one who does not expect us to tend to the poorest of the poor, as one who tells us that being a Christian is simply about believing that Jesus is God while depicting Jesus as one who is all about self-improvement, as one who believes that “God helps those who help themselves,” then we are worshiping an idol, the idol of self-righteousness and self-justification, and we need to spend some time getting acquainted with the real Jesus who is described in the New Testament.

One little detail about today’s scripture passage can shed some light into true worship and true discipleship. The magi came to Jesus; Herod did not. The Bible doesn’t say how long the wise men had travelled before they arrived in Bethlehem...or how long it took them to go home, but we can guess that they walked quite a distance to pay him homage. Herod *said* he would come to pay Jesus homage, but in the end he didn’t go anywhere. In the end he sent others to Jesus, not to pay him homage but to kill him. A true disciple walks the walk, and that walk can be a long walk. False disciples may express some intention to worship Jesus, but their action say something else. Their actions are meant to kill Jesus literally by attempting to kill him or figuratively by misrepresenting him.

It’s certainly not easy to follow Jesus. I stumble all the time. The disciples stumbled all the time. What’s important though is that we come to him with hearts ready to acknowledge the true Jesus as our true Lord. What’s important is that we are able to bow down to Jesus, to say to him, “thy will, not my will be done.”