

We Come to Worship 10-29-03

Matthew 2:1-12

Last week we talked about the wonderful name for our Savior, Immanuel. This week we are in the second chapter of Matthew, verses 1-12. (Read it!) Jesus was born in the city of David, Bethlehem. Bethlehem means 'house of bread'. It was here that Jesus was born, the bread that came down from heaven to feed the spiritual hunger of the world. The fertile fields around this city were harvested by Boaz' men in the book of Ruth. It was here that David tended his flock. Bethlehem is just 6 miles south of Jerusalem. In Jesus' day it was an equipping station for the many caravans that made trips to the feasts of the Jews.

Who are these characters, the Magi or Wise Men? The most ancient comments we find on them is that they were from Media. I don't mean they were a television news crew, but that the area was called Media. They were once a warrior group of people who tried to conquer the Persians, but after suffering a great defeat, they turned to studying wisdom and spirituality. They became advisors and priests to kings of the early world empires.

We know that almost 600 years before Christ, the prophet Daniel was taken into captivity and trained up as an advisor to the kings of Babylon and Persia. He was made a part of this group of wise men. He learned all the wisdom of the world, but he also had a supernatural wisdom that came from God. Several of the kings declared him to be the greatest of the Wise Men. Like any group, some of these men were corrupt and insincere, while others were truly seeking God. The God given wisdom of Daniel saved the lives of the other Magi on several occasions.

Daniel wrote in both Aramaic and Hebrew. He wrote Aramaic for the people in the society he served. He wrote Hebrew when it pertained to the Jewish people. His writings are preserved and come down to us in the Old Testament. There are more supposed chapters of Daniel in the Catholic Bible, and even more found in the Dead Sea community of Qumran.

I mention Daniel because Daniel predicted the coming of the Messiah, the Son of Man. He even gave a time schedule predicting the time when the Messiah would be cut off. It was a mystery to them that the Messiah would reign forever, yet at some point be cut off. If the Magi of Persia continued to study his writings, they would have known that this great One was coming. Daniel's writings predicted this coming King would stand before God and be given authority over all people and nations.

As they pondered the approaching time for this Savior to be cut off, a brilliant light appeared in the heavens. "About 11 B.C. Halley's comet was visible shooting brilliantly across the skies. About 7 B.C. there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. In the years 5 to 2 B.C. there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon. In those years, on the first day of the Egyptian month, Messori, Sirius, the dog star, rose helically, that is at sunrise, and shone with extraordinary brilliance. Now the name Messori means the birth of a prince, and to those ancient astrologers such a star

would undoubtedly mean the birth of some great king.” —Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT)

We don't know exactly when Jesus was born, but Herod the Great died in 4B.C., so Jesus' birth could have been no later than that. This would make any of the above phenomenons a possible signal to the Wise Men, or it may have been a supernatural light. Whatever it was, the Wise Men understood that this One that Daniel had written about was born. We would like to know what it was so that we might gain some hidden wisdom, but the hidden wisdom is the fact that God can reveal His will to those who seek Him.

Naturally, they went to the holy city of Jerusalem. That is where David reigned and where they thought the descendent of David would reign. It was where the Temple stood. They expected the people of this land to know about it. After all, the prophet Daniel was from Israel. So they asked the ruler at that time, Herod the Great.

Herod was a very interesting character. There are a number of rulers in the Bible called Herod, but this was the first and greatest Herod. He was made king over Israel by Caesar. He was of Idumaeen descent and married into the royal Hasmonaeen family. Since he descended from Esau, the Jews were not especially favorable to his reign, though some saw him as a Messiah. Caesar had made a wise choice for Rome. Herod was a man who had no problem compromising Judaism with the worship of Greek gods. Upon being appointed king of the region, he sacrificed to Jupiter. When back in Judea, he began a total rebuilding of the temple. He turned Caesarea into a major port, an important trade center. He was a master architect. The remains of many of his magnificent structures can still be seen today.

Herod the Great grew increasingly paranoid about rivals for his power. In his later years he even killed a number of his own family members. Though many revered him, Josephus left a long list of his crimes against the Jewish people. We can see his paranoia in his dealing with the Wise Men. He pretends that he wants to worship this new Messiah, but he is really plotting to assassinate any one that might represent a threat to his throne. When asked where this Messiah might be, Herod turned to the religious scholars for the answer. It shows he believed the words of the prophets to be accurate. It also shows his audacity to think that he could stop God.

Herod may have been reacting to the sense of expectation that was in the world at the time. This is not the imagination of overzealous Bible scholars. Listen to these historical quotes written around the time of Jesus' birth. *"There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world"* (Suetonius: Life of Vespasian, 4: 5). *Tacitus tells of the same belief that "there was a firm persuasion ... that at this very time the East was to grow powerful, and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire universal empire"* (Tacitus: Histories, 5: 13). —Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT) We see this in the writings of the Qumran community also. I believe the Spirit of God planted that expectation into the world. Where was this anticipated powerful new leader born? That is what the Wise Men were asking.

The religious leaders pointed to a prophecy in the book of Micah, chapter 5 verse 2. *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* Micah 5:2 (NIV)

Like most prophecies of Christ, this one makes an amazing claim. This One who will come out of Bethlehem to rule over Israel is from ancient times. How can that apply to anyone but the incarnated Savior? It points to Bethlehem as the birthplace.

Herod sent the Magi on their way to Bethlehem with a promise to return if they found this new King. He cleverly got them to reveal the time at which they first saw the sign in the heavens. He was calculating how old the child might be. These Magi did not appear with shepherds at the manger cave, but came one to two years later when Jesus was a toddler.

The manger scene that we imagine is probably quite different from the one in which Jesus was born. Justin Martyr was from that region and writing in the second century, he describes the manger as a cave. This is one place in Israel where we can with a fair degree of certainty point to as the actual site of the Biblical event. A church was built over the site by Constantine and remains to this day as the oldest surviving church in Israel. You may remember a few years ago when the Palestinian soldiers sought refuge in the church. The cave is under the church altar and can be seen by tourists today. There is still a trough for feed carved into the limestone wall where the animals were fed.

The star somehow guided them right to where the young child was living at that time. Verse 10 is an interesting expression. When they saw the star they were overjoyed. When Moses was guiding the Children of Israel to the Promised Land, an enemy of Israel hired a prophet to prophesy against Israel. Instead, he prophesied of the greatness of Israel. In Balaam's fourth prophecy, he predicted that a star would rise out of Jacob, a scepter from Israel. (Numbers 24:17) He called the Messiah a star. Is the Wise Men's joy over the heavenly sign or the One that it represents? *"Seeing the Star they were overjoyed."* When our spirit sees Him, we, too, are overjoyed!

I'd like to direct your thoughts back up to an expression in verse 2. *"We...have come to worship him."* See verse 11 also, *"...and they bowed down and worshipped him."* We've talked about the characters and the location and some of the fascinating hidden meanings, but now we are down to what it is all about. Now we are at the focal point of Matthew's message to us. This child is God incarnate, the King. Wise men came from distant lands for the honor of laying their gifts before Him. The word "bowed down" literally means to fall down. Head to the ground, they offered submission to this child king. He is king of the Jews, but the prophecies predicted all nations would worship Him.

Some time ago Joel challenged us to change the way we communicate. Instead of saying that we are going to church, he encouraged us to say we are going to worship. It doesn't cost us nearly as much to come and worship as it cost these men. We don't travel nearly as far, but we have the same wonderful opportunity that they

Commented [notes1]: 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. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Numbers 24:17 (NIV)

had. Just as God revealed to them that the Savior had come, He has revealed His coming to us also. Just as the Spirit of God directed them to Bethlehem, the Spirit has directed you here this morning. We have come for the same reason, to worship Him.

The gifts that they brought tell us a lot about worship. Gold speaks of several things. It is a picture of holiness, for it covered the wood of the furniture in the sanctuary and was the metal for many of its items. And gold is kingly, for King David had a crown of gold. The appropriate gift for a king was gold. When we see Jesus as the Holy One, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, our response should be to worship. Was a more holy man ever to walk this earth? Was there any as worthy to be King over all creation? When the reality of this permeates our soul, we worship. To a King we offer our submission and what is most valuable to us. Though we often treat Him as less than a King, He is the one King that deserves our total allegiance, our adoring worship. Worship costs. You shouldn't come before Him empty handed. We offer our lives, but also our treasure and talents.

Incense speaks of the priestly duty of prayer. Jesus lives today to intercede to God on your behalf. We have a Great High Priest, in the heavenly sanctuary, ministering to God that we might be blessed. (Hebrews 4:14) The Apostle Paul said that we carry the fragrance of Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:14) We intercede in the world for the lost even as Jesus intercedes for us in heaven. Incense is offered to God. The child was both our King and our God.

The last gift was Myrrh. Myrrh is a perfume. It was the principle ingredient in anointing oil. It was also the perfume that was given to the dead. Certainly Jesus was the anointed One. He is God's selection to be Messiah. He is the only one who could die in our place. Myrrh speaks of the death that He would endure for us. He is our King and our God, and yet He would die for us. Remember, that is what their prophet Daniel had predicted, that Messiah would be cut off.

Jesus, our King and God, will come again! Isaiah 60 tells us something of His Second Coming. *6Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.* Isaiah 60:6 (NIV) Instead of a few pilgrims (we do not know the number of visiting Wise Men), herds of camels will come to bring gifts of gold and incense. The gifts declare Him to be our King and our God, but what gift is missing. Myrrh! His death is an accomplished work. He has obtained victory over the grave for us.

Think for a minute about these earliest of pilgrims. They had hearts that were longing to find the mysteries of God. Once they realized the Savior was sent into the world, they left their world to come to worship. As they did they brought things that were significant of Whom they understood Him to be through the revelation of the prophet Daniel. They had so little to go on, and yet they understood so clearly and acted with such an appropriate response that we are still thinking about them 2000 years later.

Brothers and sisters, we have the whole story. We don't need to conjecture and look for signs or travel to another country. We can read about His miraculous birth, life and death at any time. What is our response? Are we stirred like these Wise Men into

Commented [notes2]: ¹⁴Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.
Hebrews 4:14 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ¹⁴But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.
2 Corinthians 2:14 (NIV)

action? Are we longing to come and worship Him, presenting our gifts that declare all that He means to us? I would like you to consider what you could give Him this year. Of course He should have your heart, but would you consider some extravagant gift that would declare who you have discovered Him to be?

You might wonder how you could give it to Him. Remember His words, "In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it to me." (Matthew 25:40) We are sponsoring some Angel Tree children this Christmas, to give presents to children whose fathers are in prison. Or maybe you know someone struggling with finances this time of year and want to help them in Jesus' name. You can give to Him by helping the neediest amongst us. Or you may want to help children overseas through the Donna Carner Christmas project. Or maybe it is some urging of the Spirit that would honor God and bless a needy person. The son of a local pastor is going in for heart surgery, I bet they need financial help.

God is faithful to warn us when we are being fooled. He showed the Wise Men to return home another way than going through Jerusalem. Herod was furious when he found out. He used the timetable that they had given him of when the heavenly sign appeared to select the age of children to murder in Bethlehem. You can't outsmart God. Joseph was already warned and on his way to Egypt with Mary and Jesus. In a short time, Herod would be dead, and Jesus and family would return to Nazareth.

I hope this also speaks to you about the providence of God. They needed money for the journey, for the time they were to stay in Egypt, and the Wise Men had just provided it. If we are dependant upon God, He is there directing and providing. Satan did everything within his power to stop the coming of the Messiah, but he could not. God is sovereign over all. His love for you saw that His plan to save you was carried out in a thousand minute details. You are loved. Come and worship! We don't come because we must, or because we are commanded, but like the shepherds and Wise Men, we long for the wonderful honor of worshipping such a gracious God whose very birth foreshadowed the death He would die in our place. Worship Him!

Join us on the patio for lunch as we welcome the Ewings as worship leaders and say goodbye for a time to Joyce Frederick.

Commented [notes4]: ⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'
Matthew 25:40 (NIV)