

SEARCHING FOR A KING

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Matthew 2:1-12

I would like to begin with a story that I have shared with you before. It is about a certain worship service in my home church that took place when I was a kid. It was Advent and this service stuck with me because the choir chose to process in at the beginning of worship singing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.”

The choir was gathered in the back of the sanctuary and the organist began his introduction to the hymn. The congregation was instructed to sing the first verse, “We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar...”

The second, third, and fourth verses were solos sung by three men in the choir—two baritones and a base. These were older men who had been fixtures in the choir my entire life. They were truly the “kings” of the choir. The first one sang *Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain, Gold I bring to crown Him again...* The second man sang *Frankincense to offer have I, Incense owns a Deity nigh...* And the third, of course, sang *Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume Breathes a life of gathering gloom...* The congregation joined in on the refrain of every verse, *O star of wonder, star of night...*

What made this hymn so memorable was that each of the soloists was dressed as Near-Eastern royalty. These were no Vacation Bible School bathrobe costumes. I assume someone raided the props department of the local community theater. These three kings were arrayed in the finest silks and furs of gold and purple. They wore ornate crowns. They had the pointy shoes that curled up at the toes. They carried elaborate gifts for the Christ child. They were kings! And as each sang their solo they marched majestically to the front of the sanctuary. I had seen a lot of church in my life but this was impressive.

Thanks to the powerful imagery of this popular hymn, this is how most of us envision the Three Kings—finely attired arriving at the manger on Christmas Eve bearing priceless gifts. Just as we see in every nativity scene.

The problem with this pervasive view of the Wise Men is that it is largely inaccurate. It is at odds with the scriptural account in Matthew.

First of all, they weren’t kings. They were magi. As best we can tell, they would likely have been Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Scripture does not tell us that there were three of them. Scripture does list three gifts, not three magi, and we make the assumption. And they did not arrive on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. They were not present at the birth of Jesus but arrived some time later—possibly as

much as three years later. They did not come to the stable but to a house in Bethlehem where the holy family resided. Technically, this story of the magi is more appropriate for the feast of Epiphany which lands on January 6—the twelfth day after Christmas—not before Christmas.

However, during this Advent, I am preaching three sermons on Searching through the eyes of the figures that we find in our nativity scenes. In the first sermon, I looked at the shepherds. They represent the people of Israel who were searching for a savior to free them from Roman occupation. They wanted a king to lead to them to becoming their own independent nation as they had been in earlier centuries. It is to these shepherds that the angel appears with the news of the child born in Bethlehem, *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord* (Luke 2:11).

Today, we are looking at the figures that the gospel calls The Magi. The term “wise men” is a holdover from the old King James Bible. The Greek word used by Matthew is μάγοι.

As Matthew tells us, when Jesus was born to Mary the ruler of Judea was King Herod. This was Herod the Great. He was not the legitimate king of Judea but instead was a Roman appointee. It is not even certain that he was actually Jewish.

During Herod’s rule, these magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem and they start asking around for the king. Specifically, they are looking for *the child who has been born king of the Jews*. They explained to people that they had *observed his star at its rising* and they had come to pay him homage.

Their inquiries got the attention of King Herod and it frightens him. After all, he was the king of the Jews put in place by the Romans, and he certainly didn’t want a legitimate king to rise and challenge him. And so King Herod called together the religious brain trust—the chief priests and scribes—and he asked them where a Messiah would be born. Just asking this question showed how little Herod knew about Judaism. Any self-respecting Jew would be familiar with the prophesy of Micah. As Matthew quotes the prophesy: *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*.

With the information that the Messiah or king would be born in Bethlehem, Herod quietly calls in the magi and learns the timing of the birth of this so-called king they are chasing. And he directs the magi to Bethlehem to find the king. Herod requests that when they find the child that they let him know so that he might go and pay homage as well.

So the magi travel the short distance to Bethlehem. The star they had been following stopped over a house and they knock on the door. Inside, they find the

child and its mother and they *knelt down and paid him homage*. From their treasure chests they extract extravagant gifts and offer them to the child. Then, because they are *warned in a dream not to return to Herod*, they take a different route home.

We could simply leave the story there. After all, this is the story as we know it from scripture and Christmas pageants. But, I believe there is more. We need to dig deeper.

Because of their prominent place in the story of Jesus' birth, we tend to honor the magi and place them on a pedestal. In doing this, we may be viewing the magi from the wrong angle. However, no matter how we view them, their significance to the events of Jesus' birth is that the magi are the first Gentiles/non-Jews to recognize Jesus.

We call the magi priests, but what they were were astrologers, soothsayers, practitioners of the esoteric arts. They were the interpreters of dreams. When we call them priests, we think of them assigned to some Persian temple. But some scholars have speculated that the magi traveled in troupes from town to town not unlike a carnival act. From Jewish documents of the day, we have evidence that many did not hold the magi in high regard and labeled them as fools. Imagine your reaction if a busload of fortune tellers and palm readers set up shop at the Fairgrounds. Would you regard them as wise? Would you take them seriously?

The notion of foolishness is held up by the fact that these magi undertook a journey following a star, possibly for hundreds of miles, and then missed. They end up in the wrong town. Their foolishness continues when they cannot see King Herod's true motives. They are too naïve to discern his lies. It takes the divine intervention of a dream to set them on the right course.

If we accept the magi as priests then we will assume that they are part of some official delegation on a diplomatic mission—a royal acknowledgement from the Persian Empire of the birth of the new king. These priests make their journey, offer tribute, and return home. Mission accomplished.

But what if they are not an official delegation but instead represent the fringe of society. They make the journey to Judea because the stars spoke to them and told them that God was at work in the world. This would be no more outrageous than the angels appearing to shepherds in the fields.

So what is it that these magi are searching for? Why did they undertake this journey?

I believe they are searching for a God who will listen to them. If they are indeed traveling fortune tellers then they will possess little power in the world.

They are like the shepherds sleeping in the fields. They are outsiders. And yet the heavens spoke to them.

That the magi are outcasts is actually consistent with the message of the gospels. Just look at those that Jesus surrounded himself with—fishermen, tax collectors, sinners—hardly the cream of society. When the Pharisees confront Jesus about his motley entourage, he replies, *For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners* (Matthew 9:13).

This child born in Bethlehem is not the king to just a few, but the king to all, savior to all, righteous and sinners, powerful and outcasts.

[Late Service] You may have noticed the name of the organ piece JD is playing for the Postlude. It upholds the idea of Jesus being savior to all. Bach's piece is titled *Now Come, Savior of the Heathen*. It is not *Now Come, Savior of the Righteous or Powerful or Influential* it is *Savior of the Heathen*.

In this season of Advent, as we anticipate the celebration of God coming into this world, we are called to prepare ourselves for his coming. Part of this preparation is to set aside our pride and arrogance and become like little children. Only then may we confess that we are [heathen] weak. We must become silly, powerless, foolish, and childish. Only then we are likely to open our hearts and minds to Jesus as Christ.