

A Regal Response to Holy Light

Matthew 2:7-15

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.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

Theme Statement

As the wise men—or magi—point to the universality of Jesus’ mission, we join with peoples of every ethnicity and culture to worship Jesus, King of all nations.

Exploring the Word

This session’s passage begins with the second conversation between Herod and the wise men. In the first visit, they sought out Herod to see what he knew (Matthew 2:2). But now Herod is seeking the same from them. Their motivation is worship. Herod’s motivation was to keep others from worshipping anyone but him.

Some have pointed out that the domain of God is “upside down.” Here we see that contrast between what God does and what humans try to do. God draws a big picture that includes all in the family of faith. Herod tries to keep a significant part of the family out of the picture completely, at the cost of many lives.

Matthew 2:7-8 Royalties and loyalties

The birth of Jesus came in the last few years of the rule of Herod the Great. During that time, the Roman-appointed king suffered considerable physical and mental infirmity. It became common for him to have fits of jealousy, and his suspicions were directed at everyone, even those he loved. Fearing for his kingdom, he sought information from the wise men about the birth of a new king. When their loyalties were to this new king and not Herod, he did something that was quite predictable—ordering the extermination of any potential rulers by killing all the male babies in the region (Matthew 2:16). While he didn’t live to deal with the new religious leader, his son Herod Antipas did, some thirty years later.

Most of what we know about the wise men, or magi, beyond Matthew’s account comes from tradition. Eastern church tradition says there were twelve magi; Western church and cultural traditions recognize only three, probably because they brought three gifts. As early as the third century, the magi were considered kings, even though they may have been astrologers or court advisors (hence the name “wise men”).

A very popular subject for art, the magi’s visit was first depicted in a second-century fresco in the Priscilla Catacomb of Rome.

Matthew 2:9-11 Heavenly guidance

Did the wise men really follow a star? From a scientific perspective, stars don’t move and then suddenly stop, making them less-than-ideal GPS navigation systems. David Weintraub, Vanderbilt University professor of astronomy, did a careful analysis of the language Matthew uses, and he explains that the “star of Bethlehem” is probably a planet. Combining an understanding of astronomy and ancient Greek astrology, Weintraub concludes that “a rare combination of astrological events (the right planet rising before the sun; the sun being in the right constellation of the zodiac; plus a number of other combinations of planetary positions considered important by astrologers) would have suggested to ancient Greek astrologers a regal horoscope and a royal birth” (“Can Astronomy Explain the Biblical Star of Bethlehem?,” *The Conversation*, December 23, 2014).

What gifts did the magi give? Fortunately, Matthew specified the gifts brought by the wise men: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Like the traditional anniversary gifts given to a married couple, these three gifts are significant in their value, which establishes their appropriateness for a king.

Matthew 2:11 says these gifts were carried in the wise men's treasure chests. While they were given as an act of worship, they also bring to mind the gifts brought before a king in other royal settings. Gold was always a gift fit for a king, but here it may also have been connected with 1 Kings 6:20-22, which describes the walls and altar of the Most Holy Place, which are overlaid with gold. Jesus was to become our High Priest with access to the Most Holy Place. Frankincense was used in worship of a deity, signaling Matthew's proclamation that the newborn king also carried a claim to deity. Finally, myrrh, a perfume, an anointing oil or tonic, was an essential ingredient in the spices used to get bodies ready for burial (John 19:39-40). It foreshadowed the death of Jesus.

Matthew 2:12-13 Multiple dreams

Dreams in the first two chapters of Matthew show the community's involvement in Jesus' call. They connect him to the divine plan (1:18-25) and protect his physical life by denying Herod knowledge of his location (wise men redirected in 2:12), sending him away before the danger intensifies (Joseph taking the family to Egypt in 2:13).

Joseph will have two more directive dreams. In 2:19-20, he is told to return with his family, since Herod has died. Later, because there was still danger, in 2:22 he is warned to avoid Judea.

Matthew 2:14-15 Exile in Egypt

Matthew tells us neither where nor how long the Holy Family lived in Egypt. He does indicate that they awaited the death of Herod, which most scholars date at 4 BCE. If it took some time for that information to reach the family, they may have spent a few months or a few years in this exile. Matthew emphasizes the connection with Hosea 11:1. (Further reading of that passage illustrates Israel's breaking covenant, a contrast to the obedience of Jesus.)

Matthew brings the call of Jesus into a context of both Jewish tradition and global importance. The presence of the wise men shows that Jesus did not come just for the nation of Israel. The departure from Egypt, paralleling the exodus narrative, connects him to the actions of God on behalf of the nation.

The Word Today

Some time ago, St. Timothy Lutheran Church had a member with an intellectual disability who loved to come to worship. The people of St. Timothy were so gracious and supportive that he invited a friend, also a person with an intellectual disability. The welcome to this person was just as gracious and supportive. Soon the congregation had a full class of adults with specific learning needs. The focus was on sharing the love of Jesus in ways that impacted every person's life. Some of the group interacted with the rest of the congregation in ways outside of social norms. For example, someone might come up to the pastor in the middle of the sermon and begin talking. Another might start singing as the congregation prayed. Instead of dwelling on how the group was different, the people of St. Timothy prioritized how they were all the same—beloved children of a loving God.

Matthew reminds us in his birth narrative that Jesus is not someone sent only to a small group of people, but rather is the Savior of the whole world. While many in our congregations may have a lot in common, God's love and grace are for those who are different from us as well.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What is the most unusual gift you've ever received?
2. Where would you most like to visit?

Exploring the Word

1. Make a list of all the things you know about the wise men who came to see Jesus. Which are from biblical sources and which are from other traditions? What would you consider the essentials of the story in understanding what God was doing through the birth of Jesus?
2. Read Hosea 11:1-9. How does this larger context influence your understanding of Matthew 2:15?
3. The Old Testament brings a rich heritage of divine guidance through dreams. Compare and contrast the dream of Pharaoh that Joseph interpreted (see Genesis 41) with the dreams of the wise men and the dreams Joseph, husband of Mary, had in Matthew.

The Word Today

1. How does your congregation help people move beyond their differences to find commonalities in the faith?

Closing Prayer

O God of all, with wonderful diversity of languages and cultures you created all people in your image. Free us from prejudice and fear, that we may see your face in the faces of people around the world; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 79)

Further Study

Genesis 37:1-11; the dreams of Joseph

Daily Readings

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| M. Exodus 1:15-22 | F. Micah 5:1-5 |
| T. 1 Kings 3:5-14 | S. Matthew 2:19-23 |
| W. Daniel 1:8-17 | S. Matthew 2:7-15 |
| T. Galatians 3:25-29 | |

Memorization

Matthew 2:11

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.