

## Overwhelmed by Joy

A Sermon based on Matthew 2:1-12

The Rev. Rebecca S. Jones '11



The story of the wise men bearing gifts to Jesus is a familiar one. When we recall this story, we often imagine three decadently dressed men, on camels, riding over the desert to bring gifts to the baby Jesus. It is true that these men are said to have traveled from afar to seek a child they knew as “king of the Jews”—but much of the story we picture in our minds is more informed by pageants and our own imaginations than the biblical account. I invite you to listen to Matthew 2:1-2 as though you are hearing the story for the first time. The visit of the wise men:

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 all 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 the 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.

This is the Word of the Lord—thanks be to God!

Matthew is the only Gospel that contains an account of the visit of the wise men to the child Jesus. This story is not a sweet story of Jesus’ birthday party, but a powerful acknowledgement of Jesus’ authority and the fulfilment of God’s promise to send a Messiah to Israel.

At the time, throughout this part of the world there existed a belief that a great king would soon arise in Judea. It was not only the Jewish people who were expecting a Messiah—the inhabitants of surrounding countries also knew of this coming event. While the birth of Jesus went largely unnoticed in Israel, apart from a few starry-eyed shepherds, magi from the east perceived this world-changing event. The magi, or

wise men, were men of great status, wisdom, and holiness. They were highly respected and considered seekers of truth through their study of philosophy, medicine, and natural sciences, as well as astrology. When these wise men noticed the rising of a certain star, they perceived something so wondrous they packed up precious gifts, left their home country (probably Persia), and set out on a long journey to find the child who had been born king of the Jews.

Naturally, they headed first to Jerusalem—the political and religious center of Judea. Surprisingly, no one seemed to know much about the child the wise men were seeking. But word got to King Herod about the presence of some men from another empire seeking “the child who has been born king of the Jews.”

Herod himself had not been born a king; he’d been appointed so by the Roman Empire, which ruled over Judea at that time. The arrival of wise men seeking a newly *born* king frightened Herod and all Jerusalem. Herod surely knew about the prophecies of the Messiah but did not expect to have to deal with his arrival! Gathering all the religious authorities—the chief priests and scribes—he sought to figure out where the Messiah was to be born. Bethlehem. Already plotting, Herod then tried to enlist the wise men as his spies: he instructed them to search diligently for the child, then return to tell Herod of his location, ostensibly so Herod might personally greet the new king as well. But Herod’s motives were not as he claimed—he did not intend to pay homage to Jesus, rather, he planned to dispose of this threat to his own kingship. In fact, Herod was so fearful and jealous for power that, when the wise men did *not* return, he attempted to eliminate Jesus by ordering all children under the age of two in and around Bethlehem to be slaughtered. The rest of Matthew 2 records the story of how Jesus avoided being killed in this massacre.

Setting out from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the wise men once again saw the star that set their journey in motion. We do not know just what star this was, but it is clear that God revealed the location of the Christ child to these wise men in a way they could understand—through a star—and they were indeed wise enough to take notice and follow. Arriving in Bethlehem, they perceived that the star stopped over the place where they would find the child. Their journey had not been in vain—they had found the king!

Herod had been terrified at even the possibility that the Messiah had been born. The wise men, however, were overwhelmed with joy. Even before they entered the house and met Jesus, the great good news of his existence overcame them. Even before they laid eyes on the child, the prospect of the promise fulfilled filled them with joy. The great king was there, just inside the door! They entered to find the child with his mother, Mary. These wise men from afar entered the home, knelt down, and payed homage the one born king of the Jews. What a strange and wondrous moment it must have been! In paying homage to the child Jesus, the wise men revered him and acknowledged him as being of a higher rank—they greeted Jesus as a true king. They greeted him in adoration and worship and offered the gifts they had carried from their homeland—gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh in a foreshadowing of the life and death of this young king of the Jews, the Messiah, Lord of all.

Here is the heart of the story of the wise men and of our celebration of Epiphany. In Matthew’s Gospel it is these wise men from a far-off land who confirm who Jesus Christ truly is: the king of the Jews. But this king will not only be king of the Jews—all people will pay him homage, all will be subject to his rule and authority. This child is not only the hope of Israel—he will be recognized and worshipped as king by people of every land.

Today, God is still being revealed to us, still inviting us to behold the true king, the Word made flesh—Jesus Christ. Let us not be overcome with fear, as Herod was, but instead let us come with wonder, and may God overwhelm us with joy!