

They saw the child, falling down, they worshipped him.

Matthew 2:11

December 25, 2022

Pastor Francis Bezzam

¹Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ²saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶“‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Have you ever had high expectations about visiting a place or town and when you arrived, it was not what you expected? It was lower than your expectations and all the excitement drained out. Maybe you went to eat out because someone gave a glowing review but when you went you went there and nothing met your expectations. But what if, even if nothing meets your human expectation, you have great joy because you met your favorite friend?

That is what we see in this passage. These wise traveled all the way to Jerusalem hoping to see a royal baby in a palace but they ended up in a poor man's house. However, their experienced great joy. Great joy because they met Jesus. When you meet Jesus, this is what happens you have exceedingly great joy.

It is quite fascinating to hear about these wise men. They men are called the *magi*. Who are these people? Surely they are not of Jewish heritage. We are told they are people of the East. The word for East in verse one is the word *anatole* - literally translated as “the land where the sun rises”. We don't knows what country they are from but they very likely of Persian origin. And we do know something about these men. They were magicians, astrologers or learned men. The word *magi* is plural for

magicians. You could say the *magi* were experts in astrology – those who looked at stars and signs of the sky. They were people who relied on dreams and their interpretations.

Now the Bible explicitly commands not to depend on any kind of magic or astrological signs. Our dependence is on God for everything we need in the present and future. In ancient days, God denounced those who used such magic or do such practices. “*Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists*”. “²⁰ “*Therefore thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against your magic bands*” Ezekiel 13:18, 20

In the book of Acts, you see Simon, who practiced magic (Acts 8:9) and Elymas the magician (Acts 13:8). Simon left his magic to become a believer in Jesus. Elymas was denounced by Paul for opposing the Gospel and became blind (Acts 13:11). Paul tells the Galatians that sorcery and things like these are works of the flesh. They are not of God. They are opposed to God.

So these wise men, *magi*, as they are called could have been magicians or astrologers for all we know. If you were to take a neutral or positive view of them, the *magi* are wise and learned men. However, that description alone is incomplete because we see that these wise men are star-gazers.

They see a star in the east. This is not metaphorical language. They literally follow a bright light in the sky. And they follow the star all the way to Jerusalem. And they come to Herod. A note about Herod. Who is Herod?

This is Herod the Great as he is called. This is a king who was declared king by the Jews in 40 B.C. He was also a client king for the Romans. So Herod was bound by Rome to follow their will. The Jews had high regard for Herod because he had built their temple. It is the temple that Herod built that Jesus walked around and taught in. The temple structure was so lavish that the rabbis said, “if you haven’t seen Herod’s temple, you have not seen beauty”.

So the wise men approach Herod. And what do they say?

Look at verse two: “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him*”.

The wise men want to know where the newborn is. We are not told how they found out about the birth of Jesus but they call Jesus the king of Jews. And why did they come? To worship him. To honor him. To pay tribute. At this point the wise men don’t know his name yet but had arrived with gifts. Gift giving was a practice of that culture.

So, Herod hears these men ask about a baby, one who is called the king of Jews one they desire to worship. What does he say and do in response?

Lets look at verses *three* through *eight*.

³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

The first thing you see is that is Herod's is troubled. He was terrified. He went into panic mode. And not just him but everyone, all Jerusalem was terrified. It's the same reaction when the disciples saw Jesus walking on water and they said, "it's a ghost".

Why was Herod and others terrified?

Obviously, Herod saw the birth of Jesus a threat to his own kingdom. He could not bear to see someone outside from his family take his place after he is gone.

Should Herod be terrified by the birth of Jesus? No, at least not in the way Herod and others react.

However, God can be terrifying for those who live in unrighteous ways, those who live in sin. There was a king named Belshazzar during the time of the prophet Daniel. When Belshazzar saw a writing on the wall, his color changed and his knees gave away. Daniel tells this king that his days were numbered because he had not honored God. Jesus was *frightening* to some just by virtue of who he is. Just a lion is majestic and terrifying. Demons *trembled* when they saw Jesus. Jesus' own disciples were terrified when he calmed a storm. In the last book of the Bible, we see a terrifying picture of Jesus – eyes like a flame of fire, his voice like the roar of many waters, from his mouth came a two-edged sword. (Revelation 1:14-16).

Jesus, however, did not come into this world to terrify people or to compete with other kings. He is called the King of Kings. Jesus came to comfort terrified people. The antidote to fear is faith in Jesus alone. Jesus came to save a condemned world.

Jesus came to defend the cause of the poor, the needy and the weak. Jesus came to rescue those who are oppressed. The greatest oppression is sin. And the greatest oppressor is Satan. Jesus came to disarm Satan and his power. Jesus is able to calm your biggest fears, rescue you from the most difficult of circumstances and meet your greatest need. And your greatest need is to be right with God. To be forgiven of sin. Unlike you and I who were born in sin, Jesus was born without sin. Jesus Christ alone is able to forgive sin. How does Jesus forgive? Jesus' shed his blood and died as a payment for sin. Jesus lived a life without sin but became like sin so that he could absorb the penalty that your sin deserves. Jesus came so that the curse of sin can be lifted. He became a curse. And for those who trust in Jesus,

the curse is lifted once and for all. Fears all lifted. Jesus did not stay dead but rose again on the third day. And one day when he comes back, he will lift us up into heaven.

So Herod has sinful or irrational fear. He is in panic when hears he about the birth of Jesus. And, this is a legitimate inquiry about Jesus. Its something Herod could not ignore. So what does he do?

He calls for an urgent meeting of all his religious leaders. And he inquires. And in verse four, you see that Herod inquired (it looks like past tense) but the grammar that he kept *inquiring*. That's how troubled he was. He kept asking. About what? He wanted to know where would the Christ be born? And the religious leaders give him the answer. The Messiah the Savior of this world would be born in Bethlehem. This is from Micah's prophecy about a ruler who would come.

⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

And then he calls the wise men secretly.

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

So, you see Herod has a three-part response. First he was terrified. Then he inquires. And then he deceives. He hatches a cunning plan. He tells the wise men to go to Bethlehem so that he himself too could go and worship him. Herod's motives are very insidious. What Herod wants to do is to make these wise men to identify Jesus' birth and then he want to kill these wise men and Jesus.

Herod is not just terrified. His fear turns him into a deceitful man with murderous intentions. Do you see a pattern here – the thief comes to steal, to lie, to deceive and destroy.

Later in the passage, Herod's *fear* turns into *fury* and he murders all the babies in Bethlehem two years and under. Jesus' parents leave and go to Egypt.

But these wise men want to complete they come to fulfill.

What do they do? Verses *nine* through *eleven*.

⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.

The wise men were probably expecting to see a child in the palace. But they were shown the door. And in some miraculous way, the same star that they followed all the way to Herod's palace also leads them out of the palace.

And as the wise men follow the star, suddenly the star stops. They were exceedingly joyful. Their religions or belief system is not disclosed to us. But we know that they followed the star to the house where Jesus was. There they find Jesus with his mother.

Notice this was not the manger where Jesus was born but a house. The parents moved out not into a royal palace but an ordinary house for poor Jewish low-income daily wage workers.

And their joy came from the fact that the star stopped. God is able to move stars or mountains or make dry bed in the sea for you to have joy.

And these wise men were willing. They were humble to stoop down from palace expectations to a small house. That is the first step to receiving joy and peace from God.

And they saw the child, the fell down and they worshipped Jesus. What are we to make this worship? Surely the wise men do not fully know about Jesus. But they surely know enough to give him the honor and respect he is owed. The wise give gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It is said myrrh is given for burial. The wise men worship Jesus. They bring choice gifts for Jesus. Gifts fit for a king.

Dear friends, this Christmas morning, what is your *response* when you hear that the Savior of the world Jesus Christ was born to save you? Would your reaction be fear, apathy, nominalism, opposition or worship? Jesus Christ deserves honor, adoration, your trust and your loyalty. Knowing Jesus Christ is the greatest joy.

Some people react in irrational *fear* because they think Jesus is there to take away their autonomy or independence. There are many people who say "I am the master of my destiny, the captain of my soul, I don't want God or Jesus to tell me to worship him". Well, I wonder if they can say that when they go through life's trails, sickness or on their death bed. Life is like a vapor. We are here and gone tomorrow. When you trust in Jesus your fears disappear and joy appears.

Other people react in *apathy*. Sadly, I know there are many people like that today. People who say, “I don’t know if this all true. I have so many doubts. Therefore, I am going to be indifferent”. To those I say doubt is the enemy of faith. God rewards those who act in faith. God never lies. “*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him*”. Hebrews 11:6

And then there are those who *oppose* the name of Jesus. The Bible tells us that those who oppose God will be opposed by God themselves in the end. Today, is the day of grace and salvation. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and find great joy.

The right response is worship. Worship is simply honor, adoration and praise. It’s giving your whole being as a response to who Jesus is and what he has done. If there are things in your life that compete in your love for Jesus, then that is not true worship. The wise men humbled themselves and worshipped Jesus.