

Text: Matthew 2.1-11
St Stephen's

Jan 2nd/3rd, 2010
Sat PM/Sun AM

Four Kings and a Fifth

Don't know why I picked that title on New Year's Weekend!!

*"We three Kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star..."*

You can almost feel the sway of the camels!

We are looking today at the arrival of the three kings in Jerusalem. By the way, Jesus was probably over a year old when this happened. And these three kings show up.

The Three Kings: Outsiders Worship

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "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."

Matt 2.1-2

They are called '**Magi**', which means they are **astronomers** (studying the 'laws' of the planets and stars) and **astrologers** (studying the 'word' of the planets and stars). In the ancient Persian culture they were considered 'wise men', and given honor and sometimes authority.

Perhaps they were 'kings' of sorts. But **to Jews** they were something else; they were gentiles, pagans, outsiders, and **idolaters**. They practiced what was **forbidden** – worshipping created things rather than the Creator. To Israel these magi would be the **least likely people** to be invited to the arrival of the messiah. But there they were ('Of all people!' we say) 'Of all people indeed!' They were **honored guests**.

They saw **his star rise** in the East. We aren't told the nature of the star. Perhaps a convergence of **planets** in the sky. Perhaps a comet. We are not told – except that they understood that it was '**his star**', and following that star they come. It is worth noting that **God speaks through nature**; Psalm 19 says the '*heavens declare the glory of God*',

and they do! Actually God **starts** to lead them through **nature**, they come to Jerusalem, and then God gives **specific** direction to them through the **Scriptures** – ‘Bethlehem!’ ‘Nature starts, and Scripture completes.’ (Bruner) God is **the author of both and uses both**.

It is worth thinking about **why they came**... Why would Gentile wise men come to seek a Jewish King? These Persians were **proud and fierce** people who 6 centuries earlier had sacked Israel, destroyed the Temple and taken her people into captivity... and now these magi undertake a journey that must have been **hundreds and hundreds of miles** and at least **half a year** from beginning to end, risking great danger, living in considerable discomfort... Why do that?

It was **not for economic advantage** or financial gain that they came. They were obviously **men of means**. Their gifts speak of that.

There is another possibility. I think they must have felt **out of sorts** with their world. They must have felt like **strangers** in their own land. They felt there **must be something more to life** than what they had seen. Maybe it happened as they said their prayers and read their books and searched the skies. Maybe it happened because life had gotten difficult. And they **see the star and know God is speaking** to them, inviting them. And they come. Spiritual hunger is a powerful force. Spiritual thirst will take you on long journeys.

Finally they arrive at Bethlehem, little Bethlehem! The star reappears over his house...

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.

Matt 2.11

They **see** the child, they **fall down** before him, they begin to **worship** him, and from their resources, from the very best they have, and **they give. They give themselves**. They give him wonderful **gifts, prophetic** gifts (‘God and King and Sacrifice’). Gifts that would point to

his future and probably were used to **provide** for his family during their two years in Egypt.

So **outsiders** come and **worship**. But the **insiders** have a very different reaction; they are **troubled**.

A Fourth King: Insiders Troubled

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...

Matt 2.3

- **Herod ruled** the Jews for 36 years; named "King of the Jews" by Rome
- **Married** 10 times and had 11 sons...
- Herod defended his throne from all comers with **murderous outbursts**: he took out all survivors of the High Priest's royal family, had his wife's brother drowned at a swimming party, murdered her uncle, murdered some of his own sons, left instructions on a trip to Rome to have his wife murdered if he should not return. Finally had her put to death. Emperor Augustus complained about Herod that it was safer to be his pig than to be his son.

This is **the history** behind Matthew's sentence:

*When Herod the king heard this, **he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him***

Matt 2:2-3

You bet they were! Because everyone knew that heads would roll.

Herod **hosts a meeting** with the leading scribes and teachers and asks where the scriptures say the Messiah will be born. Citing Micah 5.2, they tell him 'Bethlehem'.

And he sent [the wise men] 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."

Matt 2.8

Note that **Herod doesn't go himself** (he has no intention of doing so). These gentile outsiders have traveled hundreds of miles to find a king they hardly know. Herod won't go even 6 or 7 miles, to find a king that he has heard about all his life - and neither will any of the religious leaders of Israel.

Herod's opportunity comes and goes. He has received a personal, **engraved invitation** to the arrival of Israel's true king, and he is not interested. Matthew doesn't want us to miss this. **The despised believe** in the coming of the King. The privileged are **indifferent**. Or **disturbed**. Eventually, Herod strikes out...

Then Herod..., was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region

Matt 2:16

In his gospel, Matthew never calls Herod 'King' again. He simply calls him 'Herod'. He has abandoned his throne, and the magi, of all people, have with their worship taken Herod's crown and placed it on the head of the baby Jesus.

Herod is a snapshot of us. Everyone is arced towards **self-worship**. This idea that the world is here to serve us, that the world owes us, that we are 'entitled' is close to every heart. In Herod you see it out in the open, in the raw.

People who are obsessed with themselves do not warmly take to the idea that there is 'another king' in the neighborhood.

- **Example from Bec's book, 'the Narcissism Epidemic'...** pp 15,16.
- Compare that to the **opening sentences** from our worship (Our King and Savior now draws near – O come let us adore him!), or our **confession** of sin... Herod would never write words like those.
- Rick Warren put it like this in his wonderful book, 'Purpose Driven Life. 'It's not about you' – it's all about God!

We **underestimate the seriousness of our sin**. You and I are **caught** - in something beyond our capacity to fix, beyond our capacity to change. We are **not 'free' people who make 'bad choices'**; we are **captive people** – captive to forces inside and outside us that often mean...

we **do not do** what we want to do - and
we **do** what we wish we hadn't done.

That is how the Apostle Paul saw it. That's how we experience it. And here is the difficulty: we are quite often **blind to it**. Our eyes don't work right. It is so much **easier to see the sin in people around us** than it is in ourselves. And so much more fun!!!

But there is one more king...

A Fifth King: 'The Child' Enters

an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, 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."

Matt 2.13

Once in this chapter Matthew **calls Jesus by his name**. 9 times in this chapter he or others simply refer to him as **'the child'**. Not as 'the king', not as 'the messiah', not as 'his holiness of the highest degree who is to be worshipped and adored' – but again and again as 'the child'. As if Matthew wants us to see **his littleness, his vulnerability, his humility**.

And the first significant event of his young childhood is that **he is driven into Egypt** as a foreigner and refugee, hunted and hated. In this chapter, Jesus is the center of every action, but **he himself does nothing**. He simply **bears it all. Suffers it all. Carries it all**. It is the shadow of the cross, stretching back into his earliest years, pointing ahead to what is to come. He bears Herod's rage, the scribe's indifference, the public's ignorance. He bears it all, carries it all, suffers it all. And **he bears us, too**.

Which is why **the magi were right**. They came and **worshipped**. They **gave themselves**, to him. Wouldn't that be **a good New Year's resolution** (a lot better than losing 5 lbs and getting buffed up) – to make this year **a year of worship**,

to be often at his side,

to listen carefully to his voice

to give of myself to him,

to trust what he says and follow where he leads

to give of my best to him,

to dedicate myself to a special ministry for him,

to take my hours and give them to what he is doing...

all for him...

Not for me, but for him!